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ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM THE LEFT NEW ECONOMY MAY 9-16, 2016 ISSUE

# A Radical Alliance of Black and Green Could Save the World

*But first the two movements will have to rediscover their shared roots in a fundamental critique of an economy and a society that value things more than lives.*

*By James Gustave Speth and J. Phillip Thompson III*

APRIL 14, 2016

**A** beautiful thing is happening: Advocates for racial justice and for environmental protection—too often, movements quite distant from each other—are coming together in a new way. One can see it in the campaign of National People’s Action and the Climate Justice Alliance to push for a just and locally empowering transition to clean energy; in the New Economy Coalition’s inclusive membership and commitment to front-line communities; and in the projects of the Evergreen Cooperatives, in inner-city Cleveland. These new efforts (may they multiply!) are grounded on a strong foundation. When one explores the roots of both the environmental and civil-rights movements, one

finds a strikingly similar radical critique. Both movements have called for a deep restructuring of society and the economy; in both cases, that call is based on an affirmation of life and the devoted care that life requires of us.

There is urgency in this fusing. Environmentalists must confront a haunting paradox. Our environmental organizations have grown ever stronger, more sophisticated, and better funded, winning many battles along the way. Yet, 46 years after the first Earth Day, we find ourselves on the cusp of a ruined planet. Climate change is bearing down on us, with dire consequences that disproportionately impact the poor. Around the world, we are losing biodiversity, forests, fisheries, and agricultural soils at a frightening rate. Fresh-water shortages multiply. Toxins accumulate in ecosystems and in our bodies. Something is terribly wrong, and more of the same cannot be the answer. It's time for environmentalists to reassess and reboot. It's time for a new environmentalism.

One can begin by asking: What is an environmental issue? We'd say that an environmental issue is any issue that affects environmental performance. When answered that way, environmental issues must include our failing political system and the erosion of democracy; the pervasive economic insecurity that paralyzes political action; and the materialistic, racially divisive, and completely anthropocentric values that dominate our culture. Environmental degradation is also driven by the

triple imperatives of GDP growth at almost any cost, sustained corporate profits, and the projection of national power around the world.

These are among the root causes of our environmental decline, and if American environmentalists ever hope to succeed, we must find ways to address these systemic issues, which our movement has largely ignored. Environmentalists must revive our legacy of radical critique. In the movement's early days in the 1960s and '70s, those at the forefront asserted the need for a radical restructuring of the economy and society. Ecologist Barry Commoner was not alone in asking, in his 1971 best seller *The Closing Circle*, whether the operational requirements of the capitalist system are compatible with ecological imperatives. Commoner's answer was no: If we do the right things for the environment, he argued, it's difficult to see how today's economic system could continue to operate, as dependent as it is on accumulation and growth.

Ideas like these motivated many of us as we set out to build the modern environmental movement. Reviving these ideas will require a new democratic politics, one that reasserts the ascendancy of people power over money power and moves us far away from the plutocracy and corporatocracy we see today. Rebuilding people power requires a fusion of progressive efforts, which means that progressives of all stripes must come out of our individual silos to build an unprecedented social movement.

Many of us who took up the environmental cause in the late 1960s drew our primary inspiration from America's black community and its struggle for civil rights. We had entered college when the civil-rights movement was in full swing; those of us who went on to law school studied civil-rights litigation and legislation. We had seen the impact of social movements, of citizens standing up and speaking out. We regained faith in government's ability to do great good. The civil-rights movement and the '60s generally had taught us that activism could succeed, that government could succeed, that wrongs could be righted.

A great tragedy, looking back, is that the booming environmental movement of the 1970s didn't build on this civil-rights connection. Instead of forging relationships with communities of color, our movement became—for a long period—a movement composed heavily of middle-class whites. The more recent emphasis on environmental-justice concerns has helped build a bridge between environmentalists and communities of color. But the environmental and racial-justice movements remain distant, without major dialogue between them. In a world where there is a premium on a melding of progressive forces, this situation is doubly unfortunate.

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As in the environmental world, many in the black community are seeing limits to traditional advocacy. Achieving equal legal rights has enabled a small black upper-middle class to prosper, but it hasn't prevented a widening wealth gap between most blacks and middle-class whites (not to mention the superrich). Nor has it prevented the reemergence of a racialized, two-tiered educational system or the mass criminalization of black youth. Faced with this realization, a number of black leaders, from grassroots organizers (such as those involved with Black Lives Matter and the Moral Mondays movement) to scholars, are calling for a rediscovery and revitalization of the civil-rights movement's radical roots to address the deeper structural issues that America confronts.

The modern civil-rights movement had its origins in black advocacy before the Civil War, when radical activists called for a fundamental reordering of American society, beginning with its values. Martin Luther King Jr. turned increasingly to these broader issues in his later years. In his last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, King called upon his followers to "honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are 40 million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, 'Why are there 40 million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that

question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Shortly after this address, King launched the Poor People's Campaign.

Recently, Cornel West has brought together a remarkable collection of King's speeches and writings. In his book *The Radical King*, West notes that later in his career, "King's dream of a more free and democratic America and world had morphed into, in his words, 'a nightmare'... He called America a 'sick society.' At one point, King cried out in despair, 'I have found out that all that I have been doing in trying to correct this system in America has been in vain. I am trying to get at the roots of it to see just what ought to be done. The whole thing will have to be done away with.... Are we integrating into a burning house?'" The last years of King's life were devoted to reviving the radical roots of the civil-rights movement—and his own.

There is something profoundly hopeful in these calls to rediscover the civil-rights movement's radical roots. Though they're important in their own right, they are also important for environmentalists and the future of the environmental movement, and for progressivism generally.

Of course, the black struggle in America includes many strong currents of radical thought and action, more than in the environmental movement. Still, their shared roots are apparent, and the best traditions of both movements are very much aligned. Both see the origin of our country's problems in the system as a whole: in capitalism and the values and institutions that support it. As King said, the whole edifice needs restructuring. The operating system by which we live and work is programmed for the wrong results, and it needs to be reprogrammed so that it genuinely sustains and restores human and natural communities. This task is daunting, but it is also rich with opportunity as a powerful basis for dialogue and collaboration between two of our country's greatest social movements—one that holds the potential for a common language, a common critique, and a common agenda.

And there's an even deeper and more profound set of considerations that unite black and green. Early crusaders for black freedom took special aim at the worldview and values that enabled a rapacious form of capitalism—the slave system—to emerge and flourish. Unlike later theories of socialism, which focused blame for economic inequality and racial divisions on economic self-interest and power differentials between classes, advocates like Sarah Grimké and Frederick Douglass emphasized the cultural origins of inequality and oppression—in precapitalist religion, in philosophy, and in social attitudes and prejudices. They held that there could not be a fundamental change in the

economic or social system without a simultaneous revolution in deeply held values. Much later, King would revive the call for “a radical revolution of values.” He spoke with clarity about what was at stake: “We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and extreme militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

For King, “other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves.” He was referring to other humans, whereas environmentalists consider nature as the *other* about which humans must be concerned. Yet these two imperatives are ineluctably intertwined. The subjugation of nature and its life creates the pretext for the subjugation of human beings. Human dignity cannot be restored fully without first displacing the God-like status that Western thought has bestowed on some at the expense of others, as well as our instinct to sort life into hierarchies of value. Full dignity requires that humans be reconnected to each other and to the natural world that sustains all life.

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The environmental movement criticizes the separation of human beings from the natural world and the treatment of nature as existing to serve human ends. This separation has strong roots in the Western tradition, from Aristotle to the Bible. The Genesis “dominion” mandate, for example, served the cause of elevating humans over nature and has had a powerful influence down through the centuries, an influence that efforts like the Forum on Religion and Ecology have sought vigorously to counter.

The cultural historian Thomas Berry has described the European settlement of North America as “a clash between the most anthropocentric culture that history has ever known with one of the most nature-centric cultures ever known.” European settlers in the Americas made a major distinction between themselves, whom they declared were created in God’s image, and indigenous peoples and Africans, whom they regarded as less than fully human. The escaped slave and abolitionist revolutionary Henry Highland Garnet, addressing a black audience in 1848, said, “Brethren, your oppressors...endeavor to make you as much like brutes as possible.” King noted that “a nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will ‘thingify’ them and make them things.”

This attitude of control and dominion over “soulless” matter and animals, including “inferior” nonwhites, is an evil embedded deeply in the culture of modern society. It also haunts and

weakens our democracy. Absent genuine solidarity across racial groups, democracy can easily degenerate into a tyranny of the majority, as it has for much of American history. Unless we counter the white-supremacist attitude of control and domination over both nature and nonwhite others, the cross-racial solidarity we need in order to deepen democracy, change the economy, and save the environment will continue to elude us.

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Civil-rights activists were fond of saying that all human destiny is intertwined. What many indigenous philosophies teach is that the destiny of *all* life is intertwined. In 1977, the elders of the Iroquois Confederacy issued a remarkable statement, “Basic Call to Consciousness: Address to the Western World”: “The Hau de no sau nee, or the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, has existed on this land since the beginning of human memory.... Our essential message to the world is a basic call to consciousness. The destruction of the Native cultures and people is the same process which has destroyed and is destroying life on this planet. The technologies and social systems which have destroyed the animal and plant life are also destroying the Native people.... It is the people of the West, ultimately, who are the most oppressed and exploited. They are burdened by the weight of centuries of racism, sexism, and ignorance which has rendered their people insensitive to the true nature of their lives.... The people who are

living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World.”

How do we overcome our tragic legacy of subordinating nature to humans and humans to other humans? Surely one step is to see this historical pattern for what it is: the product of profound arrogance. Love, care, respect—we owe these to each other and to the natural world, and their common wellspring is an attitude of the heart, an abiding humility, awe, and reverence in the face of life’s wondrous creations: the very opposite of arrogance. ●

## **4 COMMENTS**

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