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Confronting Industrialism

Posted By *Derrick Jensen* On March 5, 2015 @ 9:47 am In articles 2014 onward | [Comments Disabled](#)

Some of the most important questions confronting us are: what should we do about this culture's industrial wastes, from greenhouse gases to pesticides to ocean microplastics?

Can the capitalists clean up the messes they create? Or is the whole industrial system beyond reform? The answers become clear with a little context.

Let's start the discussion of context with two riddles that aren't very funny.

Q: What do you get when a cross a long drug habit, a quick temper, and a gun?

A: Two life terms for murder, with earliest release date 2026.

And,

Q: What do you get when you cross a large corporation, two nation states, 40 tons of poison, and at least 8,000 dead human beings?

A: Retirement with full pay and benefits. Warren Anderson, CEO of Union Carbide. Bhopal.

The point of these riddles is not merely that when it comes to murder and many other atrocities, different rules apply to the poor than to the rich. And it's not merely that 'economic production' is a get-out-of-jail free card for whatever atrocities the 'producers' commit, whether it's genocide, gynocide, ecocide, slaving, mass murder, mass poisoning, and so on.

Do we even care? We already know they don't ...

The point here is that this culture is clearly not particularly interested in cleaning up its toxic messes. Obviously, or it wouldn't keep making them. It wouldn't allow those who make these messes to do so with impunity. It certainly wouldn't socially *reward* those who make them.

This may or may not be the appropriate time to mention that this culture has created, for example, 14 quadrillion (yes, quadrillion) lethal doses of Plutonium 239, which has a half-life of over 24,000 years, which means that in a mere 100,000 years that number will be all the way

down to only about 3.5 quadrillion lethal doses: Yay!

And socially reward them it does. I could have used a whole host of examples other than Warren Anderson, who was playing on the back nine long after he should have been hanging by the neck (he was sentenced to death *in absentia*, but the US refused to extradite him).

There's Tony Hayward, who oversaw BP's devastation of the Gulf of Mexico and who was 'punished' for this with a severance package worth well over \$30 million. Or we could throw another couple of riddles at you, which are really the same riddles:

Q: What do you call someone who puts poison in the subways of Tokyo?

A: A terrorist.

Q: What do you call someone who puts poison (cyanide) into groundwater?

A: A capitalist: CEO of a gold mining corporation.

We could talk about frackers, who make money as they poison groundwater. We could talk about anyone associated with Monsanto. You can add your own examples. I'd say you can 'choose your poison' but of course you can't. Those are chosen for you by those doing the poisoning.

Civilization's ability to overcome our native common sense

I keep thinking about one of the most fundamentally sound (and fundamentally disregarded) statements I've ever read. After Bhopal, one of the doctors trying to help survivors stated that corporations (and by extension, all organizations and individuals) "*shouldn't be permitted to make poison for which there is no antidote.*"

Please note, by the way, that far from having antidotes, nine out of ten chemicals used in pesticides in the US haven't even been thoroughly tested for (human) toxicity.

Isn't that something we were all supposed to learn by the time we were three? Isn't it one of the first lessons our parents are supposed to teach us? Don't make a mess you can't clean up!

Yet that is precisely the foundational motivator of this culture. Sure, we can use fancy phrases to describe the processes of creating messes we have no intention of cleaning up, and in many cases cannot clean up.

And so we get phrases like 'developing natural resources', or 'sustainable development', or 'technological progress' (like the invention and production of plastics, the bathing of the world in

endocrine disruptors, and so on), or 'mining', or 'agriculture', or 'the Green Revolution', or 'fueling growth', or 'creating jobs', or 'building empire', or 'global trade'.

But physical reality is always more important than what we call it or how we rationalize it. And the truth is that this culture has been based from the beginning to the present on privatizing benefits and externalizing costs. In other words, on exploiting others and leaving messes behind.

Hell, they call them 'limited liability corporations' because a primary purpose is to limit the legal and financial liability of those who benefit from the actions of corporations for the harm these actions cause.

Internalizing insanity

This is no way to run a childhood, and it's an even worse way to run a culture. It's killing the planet. Part of the problem is that most of us are insane, having been made so by this culture. We should never forget what RD Laing wrote about this insanity:

"In order to rationalize our industrial-military complex [and I would say this entire way of life, including the creation of messes we have neither the interest nor capacity to clean up], we have to destroy our capacity to see clearly any more what is in front of, and to imagine what is beyond, our noses. Long before a thermonuclear war can come about, we have had to lay waste to our own sanity.

"We begin with the children. It is imperative to catch them in time. Without the most thorough and rapid brainwashing their dirty minds would see through our dirty tricks. Children are not yet fools, but we shall turn them into imbeciles like ourselves, with high IQs, if possible."

We've all seen this too many times. If you ask any reasonably intelligent seven-year-old how to stop global warming caused in great measure by the burning of oil and gas and by the destruction of forests and prairies and wetlands, this child might well say, "*Stop burning oil and gas, and stop destroying forests and prairies and wetlands!*"

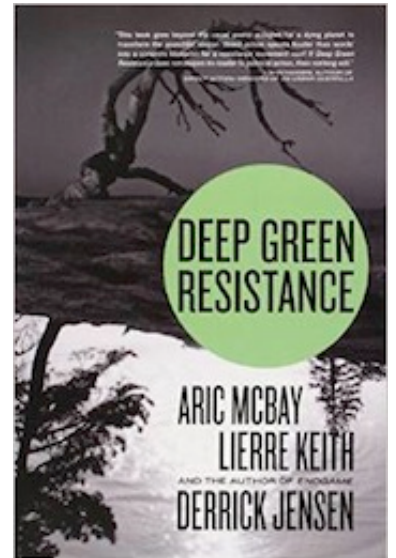
If you ask a reasonably intelligent thirty-year-old who works for a 'green' high tech industry, you'll probably get an answer that primarily helps the industry that pays his or her salary.

Part of the brainwashing process of turning us into imbeciles consists of getting us to identify more closely with-and care more about the fate of-this culture rather than the real physical world. We are taught that the economy is the 'real world', and the real world is merely a place from which to steal and on which to dump externalities.

Does nature have to adapt to us? Or us to nature?

Most of us internalize this lesson so completely that it becomes entirely transparent to us. Even most environmentalists internalize this. What do most mainstream solutions to global warming have in common? They all take industrialism as a given, and the natural world as having to conform to industrialism.

They all take empire as a given. They all take overshoot as a given. All of this is literally insane, in terms of being out of touch with physical reality. The real world must always be more important than our social system, in part because without a real world you can't have any social system whatsoever. It's embarrassing to have to write this.



Upton Sinclair famously said that it's hard to make a man understand something, when his job depends on him not understanding it.

I would add that it's hard to make people understand something when the benefits they accrue through their exploitative and destructive way of life depend on it. So we suddenly get really stupid about the waste products produced by this culture.

When people ask how we can stop polluting the oceans with plastic, they don't really mean, "*How can we stop polluting the oceans with plastic?*" They mean, "*How can we stop polluting the oceans with plastic and still have this way of life?*"

And when they ask how we can stop global warming, they really mean, "*How can we stop global warming without stopping this level of energy usage?*". When they ask how we can have clean groundwater, they really mean, "*How can we have clean groundwater while we continue to use and spread all over the environment thousands of useful but toxic chemicals that end up in groundwater?*"

The answer to all of these is: you can't.

First we must recover our sanity. Then we must act

As I've been writing this essay about the messes caused by this culture, there's an allegorical image I can't get out of my mind. It's of a half-dozen Emergency Medical Technicians putting bandages on a person who has been assaulted by a knife-wielding psychopath.

The EMTs are trying desperately to stop this person from bleeding out. It's all very tense and

suspenseful as to whether they'll be able to staunch the flow of blood before the person dies.

But here's the problem: as these EMTs are applying bandages as fast as they can, the psychopath is continuing to stab the victim. Worse, the psychopath is making wounds faster than the EMTs are able to bandage them. And the psychopath is paid very well for stabbing the victim, while most of the EMTs are bandaging in their spare time.

And in fact the health of the economy is based on how much blood the victim loses – as in this culture, where economic production is measured by the conversion of living landbase into raw materials, e.g., living forests into two-by-fours, living mountains into coal.

How do we stop the victim from bleeding out? Any child can tell you. And any sane person who cares more about the health of the victim than the health of the economy that is based on dismembering the victim can tell you. The first thing you need to do is stop the stabbing. No amount of bandages will make up for an assault that is ongoing, indeed, one that is accelerating.

What do we do about this culture's fabrication of industrial wastes? The first step is stop their production. Actually the first step is that we regain our sanity, that is, we transfer our loyalty away from the psychopaths, and toward the victim, toward, in this case, the planet that is our only home.

Once we do that, everything else is technical. How do we stop them? We stop them.

Derrick Jensen is Member of the Steering Committee of [Deep Green Resistance](#). See [more details](#). Read [Derrick Jensen's blog](#).

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