

Can capitalism go green?

Heather Rogers

Green Gone Wrong: How Our Economy Is Undermining the Environmental Revolution
Scribner, 2010 • 272 pages • \$26
Review by John McDonald

FROM WALMART'S recent campaign to call our attention to their eco-friendly practices to the good folks trying to sell us "clean coal," corporations the world over have begun marketing themselves as crusaders for environmental sustainability. Recent events in the Gulf have tarnished the sheen of BP's slick "beyond petroleum" marketing campaign, but it nonetheless stands as an oil-sodden monument to the strategy of transforming the growing environmental consciousness into fertilizer for their profit margins.

Corporate-sanctioned solutions to environmental crises have become the common currency of the mainstream of the environmental movement. *Ride your bike to work, shop locally, eat organic, change your lightbulbs, buy a Prius (and make sure to fill it up with ethanol) and shower with your dog*—these are the most readily available and most widely practiced green alternatives to alleviate our ecological woes, and most are fervently supported by the corporate world.

Could it really be the case that, conveniently for the corporations, we can shop our way out of global climate change? Muckraking journalist Heather Rogers has investigated the eco-credentials of our would-be corporate saviors and, in her new book, *Green Gone Wrong*, uses her findings to illustrate that continuing to put the onus on individual lifestyle changes and "informed" consumer choices ultimately *undermines* our ability to avert climate meltdown.

Rogers argues that the strategy of "greening" capitalism contains two major pitfalls. One is that, by selling us their snake-oil solutions, major corporations allow carbon to keep pumping into the atmosphere unabated. The second, and arguably more dangerous, offense is that in convincing us to fight ecological catastrophe by remembering to bring our reusable tote each time we shop at the local Whole Foods, our

ability to build the sort of collective action necessary to implement systemic solutions is severely hampered.

Green Gone Wrong zeroes in on three areas of our economy—food, transportation, and shelter—and proficiently cuts through the unfounded claims, false hopes, and downright deception. At the same time, Rogers brings to light presently attainable alternatives.

Perhaps the most haunting of the book's revelations comes from Rogers's investigation of organic sugar plantations in what's left of Paraguay's tropical rainforests. She visits the country's top organic sugar maker, Azucarera Paraguaya (AZPA), which "provides a third of all organic sugar consumed in the United States." AZPA's sugar, despite bearing the organic seal of approval, is not only grown using monocrop farming techniques, but it also relies on fertilizer from an adjacent industrial poultry farm where the animals are force-fed hormones, antibiotics, and arsenic to accelerate their growth. As Rogers puts it,

An outsider might conclude that these [practices] are at odds with official USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulations, but the devil is in the details. The legal text that delineates NOP standards doesn't explicitly ban monocropping—in fact the word is never mentioned. Further, the rule sheet uses the term *biodiversity* just once, in the definition of organic farming.

As if these regulations weren't feeble enough, their impact is further diluted by the fact that the USDA outsources on-site inspection to third-party for-profit certification agencies. To make matters worse, these agencies are hired for annual inspections *by the farms seeking certification*, guaranteeing that they have an incentive to overlook transgression, lest they lose important clients.

Yet where this farce truly becomes tragic is in the discovery that profits on organic produce have soared so high that vast swathes of once pristine forest are daily razed to the ground to make way for sprawling sugar plantations. So, thanks to the genius of the market, the organic revolution is helping to clear-cut the rain forest

and thus accelerate the accumulation of CO2 trapped within the atmosphere.

To show how destructively the profit imperative operates in the auto industry, Rogers uses the bumbling honesty of Detroit executives themselves. High-ranking officials from the Big Three automakers share a vision of a cleaner tomorrow that features fuel-efficient SUVs—a conviction undeterred by the clear market demand for hybrid vehicles and the success of experiments with electric cars.

Reginald Modlin, Chrysler's director of environment and energy, provides some insight into why his company is making sure not to change too much too fast. Rogers writes:

[Chrysler] is moving so slowly on clean vehicles because it's not up to the Chryslers of the world to forge greenhouse gas-busting breakthroughs. "That's for the entrepreneurs to do," [Modlin] says. "And when they've got something really good, we'll come in and either buy that product from them or buy their company."

Yet this excuse for the glacial pace of innovation is exposed as disingenuous by the knowledge that the first gas-electric hybrid vehicle was built over a hundred years ago—or that GM has successfully marketed a fleet of fuel-efficient cars in Europe, none of which are available on this side of the ocean.

Ford, Chrysler, and GM all persist in manufacturing SUVs (albeit ones with slightly improved fuel efficiency) because these monstrous vehicles net thousands of dollars more in profits than smaller cars do. As Rogers writes,

Current vehicles...demonstrate that alternative drivetrains work. The primary holdup is that internal combustion engines have been so much more profitable. The market hasn't brought us eco-cars; it's brought us SUVs. Consequently, we're waiting not so much for great technological breakthroughs as for the major auto firms to figure out how best to profit from them.

When Rogers discusses currently existing eco-architecture in Germany—and the struggle that made it possible—she touches on the most important lesson regarding what it will take to implement even the energy alternatives that exist already. From the eco-community of Vauban to the increasingly popular Passivhaus technology, Germany is unmatched in its adaptation of more environmentally friendly housing units.

Yet, as Rogers points out, these strides forward (even if insufficient in themselves) would have been impossible if not for the mass movement against nuclear energy that emerged in the late 1970s and paved the way for the creation of Europe's first Green Party. Popular mobilizations and widespread activism around environmental issues thus made a lasting impact on popular consciousness, without which today's eco-architecture, and the government subsidies that make it possible, would be inconceivable.

Although the route of "green capitalism" may seem to offer an easy out for those justifiably terrified about the prospects of facing down crocodiles in Canada, it is just not an efficient strategy for curbing carbon emissions. It may in fact lead down the path to an accelerated ruin. Rogers puts it well,

Shopping green is alluring in part because it is simple (albeit often expensive), unlike the messy business of working toward systematic change. But consumption as politics bypasses pushing for action that might bring substantive shifts... Meaningful transformation requires not just unconventional products, but the creation of an alternative logic, where consuming less would *improve* the standard of living and where success was defined quite differently.

Green Gone Wrong provides a much-needed dose of sober optimism. Its unflinching honesty provides a corrective to those within the environmental movement unwilling to admit that the market itself (i.e., capitalism) is the primary obstacle to a sustainable society.