

Peter Gelderloos

**An Anarchist Solution
to Global Warming**

2010

If the Green Capitalist response to climate change will only add more fuel to the fire, and if government at a global scale is incapable of solving the problem, as I argue in previous articles^{1,2}, how would anarchists suggest we reorganize society in order to decrease the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and to survive an already changed world?

There is no single anarchist position, and many anarchists refuse to offer any proposal at all, arguing that if society liberates itself from State and capitalism, it will change organically, not on the lines of any blueprint. Besides, the attitude of policy, seeing the world from above and imposing changes, is inextricable from the culture that is responsible for destroying the planet and oppressing its inhabitants.

Nonetheless, I want to outline one possible way we could organize our lives, not to make a concrete proposal, but because visions make us stronger, and we all need the courage to break once and for all with the existing institutions and the false solutions they offer. For the purposes of this text I'm not going to enter into any of the important debates regarding ideals — appropriate levels of technology, scale, organization, coordination, and formalization. I'm going to describe how an ecological, anti-authoritarian society could manifest itself, as it flows from the un-ideal complexity of the present moment. Also for simplicity's sake, I won't enter into the scientific debate around what is and isn't sustainable. Those debates and the information they present are widely available, for those who want to do their own research.

I base the description of this future possible world both on what is physically necessary and what is ethically desirable, in accordance with the following premises.

- Fossil fuel extraction and consumption need to come to a full stop.
- Industrial food production must be replaced with the sustainable growing of food at the local level.
- Centralizing power structures are inherently exploitative of the environment and oppressive towards people.
- The mentality of quantitative value, accumulation, production, and consumption — that is to say, the mentality of the market — is inherently exploitative of the environment and oppressive towards people.

¹ www.counterpunch.org

² news.infoshop.org

- Medical science is infused with a hatred of the body, and though it has perfected effective response to symptoms, it is damaging to our health as currently practiced.
- Decentralization, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, and non-coercion are fully practical and have worked, both within and outside of Western Civilization, time and time again.

Welcome to the future. No one ever knew global society would look like this. Its defining feature is heterogeneity. Some cities have been abandoned, trees are growing up through their avenues, rivers rush where asphalt had once covered the ground, and skyscrapers crumble while deer forage at their foundations.

Other cities are thriving, but they have changed beyond recognition. Rooftops, vacant lots, and sidewalks have turned into gardens. Fruit- and nut-bearing trees line every block. Roosters welcome every dawn. About a tenth of the streets — the major thoroughfares — remain paved or gravelled, and buses running on biofuels traverse them regularly. Other streets have been consumed largely by the gardens and orchards, though bike paths run down the middle. The only buildings that have electricity twenty-four hours a day are the the water works, hospitals, and the radio stations. Theaters and community buildings get power until late on a rotating basis, so they can stay open for film nights or other events. Everyone has candles and wind-up lamps, though, so there's a light on in many a window until late. But it's nothing like how it used to be; at night you can see stars in the sky, and the children gape in disbelief when the old-timers tell how people had given that up.

Electricity is produced through a network of neighborhood-based power stations that burn agricultural waste (like corn cobs) and biofuels, and through a small number of wind turbines and solar panels. But the city works on just a fraction of what it used to. People heat and cool their homes through passive solar and efficient design, without any electricity. In the colder regions, people supplement this in the winter with the burning of renewable fuels, but houses are well insulated and ovens are designed with the greatest efficiency, so not much is needed. People also cook with fuel-burning ovens, or in sunnier climates solar ovens. Some cities that put more energy into manufacturing and maintaining renewable forms of electricity generation (solar, tidal, and wind) also cook with electricity. Many buildings have a shared washing machine, but all clothes drying is done the old-fashioned way: on a line.

No one has a refrigerator though every building or floor has a communal freezer. People store perishables like yogurt, eggs, and vegetables in a cool box or in a cellar, and they eat their food fresh or they can it. People grow half of their own produce in gardens on their block. Nearly all their food is grown within twenty

miles of where they live. None of the food is genetically modified or produced with chemicals, and it is bred for taste and nutrition, not longevity and durability for transport. In other words, all the food tastes better, and people are far healthier. Heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, among the greatest killers in capitalist society, have all but disappeared. The super viruses created under capitalism, that killed millions of people throughout the collapse, have largely disappeared, as the use of antibiotics has almost stopped, people live in healthier conditions globally and have stronger immune systems, and global travel is not so frequent or fast-paced. People also have a much greater environmental consciousness and personal connection with their bioregion because they eat what's in season and what grows locally, and they help grow it themselves.

Every house has a compost toilet and running water, but no sewage. It's become sort of an unwritten rule around the world that every community must remediate its own waste. Sending pollution downstream is the greatest taboo. The relatively few remaining factories use fungi and microbes, on great forested plots around the factory compound, to remediate whatever pollutants they produce. Neighborhoods turn all their waste into compost or fuel. The amount of available water is limited, so buildings are equipped with rainwater catchments for the gardens. Households that greatly exceed the recommended quota for water usage are publicly shamed. The recommended quota is not enforced; it is simply a suggestion distributed by those who work in the water syndicate, based on how much water the city is allowed to divert from the water source, as agreed upon by all the communities that share the watershed.

In most cities, people hold periodic or ad hoc neighborhood assemblies to maintain the gardens, paths, streets, and buildings, to organize daycare, and to mediate disputes. People also participate in meetings with whatever syndicate or infrastrucutral project they may dedicate some of their time to. These might include the water syndicate, the transportation syndicate, the electricity syndicate, a hospital, a builders' union, a healers' union (the vast majority of health care is done by herbalists, naturopaths, homeopaths, acupuncturists, massage therapists, midwives, and other specialists who make home visits), or a factory. Most of these are decentralized as much as possible, with individuals and small working groups trusted to know how to do their job, though when necessary they coordinate through meetings that usually run as open assemblies using consensus, with a preference for sharing perspectives and information over making decisions wherever possible. Sometimes, interregional meetings (such as for the communities of a watershed) are organized with a delegate structure, though meetings are always open to all, and always seek to reach decisions that satisfy everyone since there are no coercive institutions and coercion of any sort is widely frowned upon as "bringing back the old days."

Because power is always localized to the greatest possible degree, the vast majority of decision-making is carried out by individuals or small groups that share affinity and regularly work together. Once there is no longer an emphasis, for purposes of control and accumulating power, on imposing homogeneity or singularity of outcomes, people have found that much coordination can simply take place organically, with different people making different decisions and figuring out for themselves how to reconcile these with the decisions of others.

Although today's societies are structured to create feelings of community and mutuality, there is also a great amount of space for privacy and solitude. Many neighborhoods have communal kitchens and dining rooms, but people can and often do cook on their own and eat by themselves, when the mood strikes them. Some societies have public baths, while others do not, depending on cultural preference. The forced communalization of past experiments in socialist utopias is absent from this world. Private property has been abolished in the classical sense of the means of production that other people rely on for their survival, but anyone can have as many personal belongings as they can get — clothing, toys, a stash of candy or other goodies, a bicycle, etc.

The smaller or more intimate the community, the more likely it is to operate a gift economy — anything that you're not using, you give away as a gift, strengthening your social ties and increasing the amount of goods in circulation — which is perhaps the longest lasting and most common economy in the history of the human species. Beyond the neighborhood level, or for items that are rare or not locally produced, people may trade. The syndicates of some cities may use a system of coupons for the distribution of things that are scarce or limited. If you work in the electricity syndicate, for example, you get a certain number of coupons that you can use to get things from the bicycle factory or from an out-of-town farmer.

The most common items produced in factories are bicycles, metal tools, cloth, paper, medical equipment, biofuels, and glass. More common than the factory is the workshop, in which people craft any number of things at a higher quality and slower, more dignified (and healthy) pace. Workshops usually use recycled material (after all, there are many old shopping malls filled with junk and scrap) and make things like toys, musical instruments, clothes, books, radios, electricity generation systems, bicycle and automobile parts.

Work is not compulsory, but nearly everyone does it. When they can be their own bosses, and make things that are useful, people tend to enjoy working. Those who don't contribute by working in any way are often looked down on or excluded from the nicer aspects of living in society, but it is not considered acceptable to ever deny someone food or medical treatment. Because they don't help others, they are unlikely to get fine foods, and healers are unlikely to give them consultations,

massages, or acupuncture unless they have a specific problem, but they won't be left to starve or die. It's a small drain on the resources of the community, but nothing when compared to the parasitism of the bosses, politicians, and police forces of yesteryear.

There are no police anymore. Generally people are armed and trained in self-defense, and everyone's daily life includes activities that foster a collective or communal sense of self-interest. People depend on cooperation and mutual aid for survival and happiness, so those who damage their social ties are above all harming and isolating themselves. People fought to overthrow their oppressors. They defeated the police and military forces of the ruling class, and they remember this victory. The imperative to never again be ruled forms a major part of their identity today. They are not about to be intimidated by the occasional psychopath or roving gang of protection racketeers.

In short, the city has a negligible environmental footprint. A high density of people live in an area that nonetheless has an impressive biodiversity, with many plant and animal species cohabiting the city. They don't produce pollution that they don't remediate themselves. They take some water from the watershed, but far less than a capitalist city, and in agreement with the other communities that use the watershed. They release some greenhouse gases through fuel burning, but it is less than the amount they take out of the atmosphere through their own agriculture (since all their fuels are agricultural, and the carbon they're releasing is the same carbon those plants removed from the atmosphere as they grew). Nearly all their food is local and sustainably grown. They carry out a small amount of factory production, but most of it uses recycled materials.

Outside the city, the world is even more transformed. Deserts, jungles, mountainous regions, swamps, tundras, and other areas that cannot sustainably support high population densities have rewilded. No government programs were necessary to create nature preserves; it simply wasn't worth the effort to remain there once fossil fuel production ended. Many of these areas have been reclaimed by their prior indigenous inhabitants. In many of them, people are again existing as hunter-gatherers, enacting the most intelligent form of economy possible in that bioregion and turning the conventional notion of what is futuristic on its head.

Some rural communities are self-sufficient, supporting themselves with garden agriculture and animal husbandry, or more intentionally with permaculture. Many people who moved out of the cities during the collapse set up these communes, and they're happier and healthier than they'd ever been under capitalism. Some of the permaculture communities are composed of more traditional households, with each family tending an acre or two of land, spread out with a fairly homogenous distribution over a wide expanse of territory. Others comprise of a densely populated communal nucleus with several hundred inhabitants living

on a dozen acres of intensively cultivated gardens, surrounded by orchards and pastures for fruit, nuts, and livestock, with an outer ring of natural forest as an ecological buffer and a place for occasional woodcutting, hunting, and wildcrafting. These rural communities are almost entirely self-sufficient, have a sustainable relationship with their landbase, encourage a high biodiversity, and produce no net release of greenhouse gases.

Rural communities in a tight radius around the cities carry out intensive agriculture aided by certain manufactured goods, in a symbiotic relationship with their urban neighbors. Every week, using horsecarts or biodiesel pickup trucks, they bring food and biofuels to a specific neighborhood in the city, and cart away compost (largely from the toilets, as food scraps go to feeding the urban chickens). With this rich compost, glass for greenhouses, metal tools, and the occasional tractor or mechanical plow shared among several farmsteads, they can produce high yields year round without destroying their soil or relying on chemicals and fossil fuels. They use intercropping and other permaculture methods to preserve soil health and discourage pests. These farms are dotted by orchards and small forests so there is a high biodiversity, including plenty of birds that eat the insects. Because they do not grow their plants in massive monocrop fields, pests and diseases don't spread as uncontrollably as in capitalist agriculture. The use of local plants, multiple breeds, the protection of the soil and the preservation of forests also mitigate the impacts of drought and other extreme weather caused by climate change.

There is still a fair amount of transportation between bioregions. Cities are linked by trains running on biofuel, and people regularly cross the oceans on boats powered primarily by the wind. A certain amount of interregional trade happens this way, but above all interregional transportation allows for the movement of people, ideas, and identities. People are less mobile than they were in the final days of capitalism, but on the other hand people are not compelled to follow the vagaries of the economy, to be uprooted in search of work. Bioregions are almost entirely self-sufficient economically, and people can support themselves. If they move, it's because they want to travel, to see the world, and they are free to do so because there are no more borders.

Longer distance communication happens primarily through the radio. Most urban or semi-urban communities have telephone and internet. Highly toxic computer production has mostly ended, but a few cities use new, slower but cleaner methods to continue manufacturing computers at a minimal scale. However enough old parts are in circulation that most neighborhoods that want to can keep a few computers running. Many rural people live close enough to a city to access these forms of communication from time to time. People still get news

from around the world, and they continue to cultivate an identity that is partly global.

The economic basis for society has greatly diversified within any linguistic community. In other words, someone may live on an agricultural commune with a technological level most similar to that of Western society in the 19th century, but next to them is a forest inhabited by hunter-gatherers, and a few times a year they go to a city organized by syndicates and neighborhood assemblies, where there is electricity, buses, a train station or a harbor, where they can watch movies or read the blog of someone on the other side of the world. Pictures and news from around the world pass through their commune on a fairly regular basis. They speak the same language and share a similar culture and history with these communities that are otherwise so different. An effect of this is that a clannish, insular identity that could lead to a number of problems, among them the potential regeneration of domineering and imperialistic behaviors, is constantly offset by the cultivation of a global identity and a mixing with highly different members of a broader community. In fact, because most linguistic communities extend far beyond a single bioregion and because people enjoy an unprecedented amount of social mobility, there is an unending circulation of people between these different communities, as every individual decides, when they come of age, whether they want to live in the city, the countryside, or the forest. Not only do borders no longer exist between artificially constructed nations; social borders no longer prevent movement between different identities and cultural categories.

For the older people, this way of living feels like paradise, mixed with the gritty details of reality — conflict, hard work, heartbreak, and petty drama. For the younger people, it just feels like common sense.

And every year, the world heals a little more from the ravages of industrial capitalism. The amount of real forest and wetlands have increased as some areas rewild, while heavily inhabited areas become healthy ecosystems thanks to gardening, permaculture, and the elimination of cars. Greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere are actually declining, albeit slowly, for the first time in ages, as carbon is returned to the soil, to forests and wetlands, to the newly green urban areas, and the burning of fossil fuels has stopped. Over a third of the species on the planet went extinct before people finally changed their ways, but now that habitat loss is being reversed, many species are coming back from the brink. As long as humanity doesn't forget the hardest lesson it ever learned, in a few million years the biodiversity of planet earth will be as great as ever.

Dignified living has replaced profit as the new social yardstick, but in a coup against all the engineers of social planning, everyone is allowed to make their own measurements, to determine for themselves how to achieve this. People have regained the ability to feed and house themselves, and individual communities

have proven that they are the best situated to craft a mode of sustenance that is best adapted to local conditions and the varied changes brought about by global warming. In the end it's a no-brainer. The one solution that all those who were profiting off of climate change would never discuss was the only one that had a hope of working.

For the longest time, people didn't give credence to those who were warning about climate change, about ecological collapse, about other problems created by government and capitalism; those who were calling for radical solutions. In the end they saw that the best decision they ever made was to stop trusting those in power, those responsible for all these problems, and instead to trust themselves, and take a plunge.

Those readers who doubt the possibility of this vision can check out Peter Kropotkin's Field, Factories, and Workshops of Tomorrow, which scientifically lays out a similar proposition, over one hundred years ago. They can also look into how the native land they live on was organized before colonization. Where I'm from, the Powhatan Confederacy kept the peace and coordinated trade between several nations in the southern part of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. To the north, the Haudensaunne kept the peace among five, and later six nations, for hundreds of years. Both of these groups supported high population densities through intensive horticulture and fishing without degrading their environments.

Where I live now, in Barcelona, the workers took over the city and factories and ran everything themselves in 1936. And where I happen to be as I write this article, in Seattle, there was a monthlong general strike in 1919, and the workers there also proved themselves capable of organizing themselves and keeping the peace. This isn't a dream. It's an imminent possibility, but only if we have the courage to believe in it.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



Peter Gelderloos
An Anarchist Solution to Global Warming
2010

Retrieved on 24 November 2010 from anarchistnews.org