

IMAGINE



“... a system that is democratic and equitable, organized and carried out to fulfill human needs in ways that regenerate and maintain a healthy biosphere.”

— Fred Magdoff & Chris Williams, *Creating an Ecological Society: toward a revolutionary transformation*

Welcome to Issue 6 of Imagine, an occasional pamphlet devoted to envisioning what a better world could be like and ways we can make it real. If we cannot imagine a better world, no path will take us there. This vision is a work in progress — we welcome your ideas for consideration and discussion (email is below). Future issues of Imagine will continue to expand on the vision and contemplate making it happen.

Failures of Capitalism Further Explored

As noted in our previous issue, freedom to choose products or services is not the same as freedom to decide what to produce and what activities to pursue. This observation leads directly to our next question:

Can capitalism increase our material standard of living in a way that supports our quality of life?

In order to support a high quality of life, our production and distribution of goods and services must first, at a minimum, provide for the basic necessities of life such as healthy food and clean air and water for everyone. In addition, the time and ability to engage in activities that are important to us must be available. The best kitchen that money can buy is useless without the time or the ingredients necessary to cook in it. A capitalist mode of production and distribution fails in multiple ways to provide these things, in spite of the plethora of goods and services offered on the market.

The question is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized.

— Rachel Carson

The creation of technological advances such as antibiotics that improve our quality of life has largely been due not to competition and the profit motive, but to the free exchange of scientific knowledge at institutions sheltered from those motives, such as universities. Private companies simply harvest the profits from marketing them. Other major improvements to quality of life have come from public works that would not have been profitable, such as sewage systems. In contrast, the drive for profit has led to grave harms, such as environmental degradation and resource depletion, that increasingly outweigh the benefits of material abundance. In addi-

tion, a system driven by competition is unable to deal with complex problems that require cooperative solutions, such as climate change and ecological collapse.

- *Capitalism Creates Economic Insecurity and Undermines Social Cohesion*

In a society based on wage labor, economic security requires a steady job with a good living wage or salary. Yet many peoples' jobs are poorly compensated and extremely precarious. With their drive for profits, corporations strive to get as much productivity out of each worker as possible, often by introducing technology. Greater worker efficiency enables corporations to employ fewer workers, inevitably creating unemployment and putting downward pressure on wages, since workers have less power when the competition for jobs is greater. Because workers must continue to work long hours in order to make ends meet, the promise that "labor-saving" technology can provide more free time for enjoyment remains unfulfilled. Thus capitalism cannot provide economic security and a satisfying life for most people, while still providing adequate profits at competitive prices. Furthermore, the great inequalities of income and wealth that this dynamic generates undermine social cohesion, damaging the the health and quality of life of people at all levels of society, not just the poor. We will come back to the damaging effects of inequality in future issues.

- *Capitalism Hoards Knowledge*

Capitalist enterprises depend on proprietary rights. For example, when a deadly pandemic occurs, companies keep their research secret from competitors as they race to bring a vaccine to market. In contrast, sharing knowledge openly leads to better results by combining the insights and findings of all those working on a solution.

Once vaccines are created their formulas are not freely shared. Rich countries can afford to buy them while people in poorer countries continue suffering and spreading the

disease, allowing more opportunity for the pathogen to mutate. In this way, the health of both the rich and the poor is harmed.

- *Capitalism Sacrifices Long-term Benefits For Short-term Gains*

Pressure to make as much money as possible as quickly as possible leads to short-term thinking that is counterproductive in the long run. The collapse of the privately-owned electrical grid in Texas is a recent example that caused great hardship. To cut costs, the electric companies neglected to prepare the grid adequately for severe winter weather. The result in February of 2021 was a major failure during days of ice and snowstorms, leaving millions of people without electricity and heat during freezing temperatures. The suffering caused by the failure of the grid was compounded by economic distress as companies jacked up prices for scarce electricity. The same investors who caused the crisis were not punished, but were rewarded for it.

The US spends more on healthcare than any nation in the world, and more than twice as much as the average high-income country. At the same time, it has the lowest life expectancy and highest suicide rates among 11 developed nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

— Jessica Glenza, *The Guardian*

The private healthcare system of the United States is another example of how a market motivated by financial gain fails to secure our quality of life. We spend more per person and have shorter healthy life expectancies than other developed countries with national public healthcare systems. Forced by a profit-driven medical industry to maximize revenues, hospitals are built where there is the most potential for patients, leaving rural

areas greatly underserved. Similarly driven to cut costs, hospitals fail to maintain adequate supplies and beds for the emergencies that inevitably arise. The pandemic has harshly revealed the dire consequences of these failings.

When the Covid pandemic began there were severe shortages of N95 masks needed to protect frontline medical workers. A year later some hospitals still lack adequate N95 masks for their staff. At the same time medical supply companies now have a large surplus of N95 masks that they are unable to sell. How can this be if our market system really works? Because of demand early in the pandemic, many companies increased the price of N95 masks by a large amount, and hospitals were forced to drain their supply budgets in order to obtain them. In addition, on account of inadequate regulation, unscrupulous companies were able to exploit the large demand by making and selling masks advertised as N95 that were not genuine and did not give the necessary protection. Now, although a surplus of genuine N95 masks is sitting in warehouses, many hospitals cannot afford to purchase them; furthermore, they don't know which suppliers to trust. Bottom line: a market system driven by profit does not work for the things that matter most!

Have you ever wondered why products don't seem to last as long as they used to? You're not imagining it. Many household appliances, such as refrigerators and washing machines, used to last many decades and were simple to repair when parts failed. But as more and more people acquired these items and markets became saturated, companies found it expedient to increase sales by reducing the quality of products and making them harder to repair so they need to be completely replaced more often. This practice, called planned obsolescence, not only harms consumers, but is also devastating for the environment, since these products require a lot of energy and material to make and often wind up in landfills.

Capitalism doesn't deliver the promised

“good life”. More importantly, the effect of capitalist values on the integrity of the earth's ecosystems is closing off the possibility of survival for any organized form of human society, perhaps even for humanity as a species.

Does capitalism allow for the permanent preservation of ecological and geological integrity and a healthy (that is, minimally toxic) environment for human and non-human life? In particular, does it allow us to restore a stable and livable climate and a chemical balance in the oceans conducive to plankton, coral, fish, and marine mammals? Does it allow us to maintain biodiversity and stop the sixth great mass extinction of life on earth?

- *Capitalism Encourages Cutting Down the Last Tree*

Consider a forest. Under capitalism there is constant pressure to cut it down and make a profit, both from making lumber out of the trees and clearing the land to plant monoculture crops (including tree farms). From the perspective of business, a forest left to grow wild is a “wasted resource”, even though the biodiversity it shelters and ecological services it provides are critical to a livable environment.

We are unthinkable without fungi, yet seldom do we think about them. It is an ignorance we can't afford to sustain.

— Merlin Sheldrake

Consider a vein of coal in the ground or a deposit of copper. Under capitalism there is constant pressure to mine it, regardless of the resulting pollution of waterways or mountain-top removals required to get to it.

Consider the effect of capitalism on our food system. The capitalist notion of “efficiency”, which ignores all factors unrelated

to profit, leads agribusiness to grow monocultures of crops for easy mechanical harvest, apply toxic pesticides to curtail weeds and insects, and feed livestock unnatural diets laced with antibiotics in crowded pens to speed up production. These practices amount to mining the soil, and as it erodes and its nutrients are used up, conventional farmers restore fertility with artificial fertilizers produced with mined minerals and fossil fuel energy. As pesticides, fertilizers, and tillage destroy the complex soil biome, kill beneficial organisms, and stimulate the evolution of resistance in the organisms they target, greater amounts are needed to produce the same effect. Our environment is made increasingly toxic. Meanwhile the nutritional quality of our food declines, since artificial fertilizers replace only a few of the nutrients that have been lost. There are better ways to grow our food which actually improve the health of the soil, but we need to work with nature, nurturing all the organisms that are vital to maintaining the health of our ecosystems.

- *Capitalism Encourages Pollution*

Instead of using safer but more costly production methods, many capitalist enterprises pollute the environment in their drive for profit. They use their power to weaken environmental regulations and absorb any fines they receive for violations as a business expense. We pay the price for fouled air and water and leaching pits of toxic waste: in medical bills, clean-up costs (when clean-up is done at all), illnesses, and ruined “sacrifice zones” continually expanding over the face of the earth.

It would take the resources of four planet Earths to support an American lifestyle for everyone in the world.

— Charlotte McDonald, *BBC News*

Although stronger regulation would be an improvement, no amount of regulation could stop capitalism from destroying the earth, as it has been doing at an increasing rate since its inception. In order to create profitable investment opportunities and absorb the unemployment created by competition and technical innovation, capitalism must continually expand. That is why politicians are obsessed with economic growth. But this growth sacrifices increasing portions of the earth as resource stocks for production, routes for distribution, and repositories for waste. High-profile victories, such as cleaner urban rivers or the return of the bald eagle, mask the overall scope of less visible destruction from dispersed toxic pollution, acidifying oceans, dead zones, habitat loss, and climate disruption. We have already seen mass die-offs of frogs and other life forms as the sixth great extinction of life on earth proceeds. Is this the best we can do?

Can capitalism create a world characterized by beauty rather than ugliness?

Eight-lane highways clogged with traffic, strip malls, advertisements assaulting us everywhere,

... You decide!

We have become a civilization based on work – not even “productive work” but work as an end and meaning in itself.

— David Graeber