

# **A Debate on Capitalism, Environmentalism, and “Environmental Catastrophism”**

Sam Gindin and Ian Angus

September 17, 2014

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# Once Again on “Environmental Catastrophism”: A Reply to Sam Gindin

by Ian Angus

Last year in *Monthly Review*, I debated Eddie Yuen, an anarchist who believes it is a mistake for radicals to focus on telling the truth about the global environmental crisis, because “awareness of climate crisis does not necessarily lead to increased political engagement.” Not only can such awareness lead to apathy, he wrote, but “environmental catastrophism is very likely to be mobilized by economic and national elites to reinforce existing inequalities and expand enclosures, commodification, and militarization.”<sup>1</sup>

I never expected to hear similar arguments from a Marxist, much less one I respect as much as Sam Gindin, a longtime leader of the labor movement in Canada who is now an adjunct professor at York University and co-author of the Deutscher-prize winning book *The Making of Global Capitalism*.

But Gindin has indeed made a very similar argument, in a recent Jacobin article, “Unmaking Global Capitalism,” and in a subsequent exchange with Vancouver ecosocialist Brad Hornick in *Rabble*.<sup>2</sup>

In his Jacobin article, Gindin issues a particularly strong warning against “environmental catastrophism,” which he characterizes as “declarations that the end of the planet is only decades away if capitalism isn’t radically changed now.” He also calls such declarations “fearmongering” and “crisis-mongering as a mechanism for overcoming popular passivity.”

Challenged by Hornick to answer, “Is there or is there not a crisis?” Gindin replies: “If it is clear the world is going to end in 20 years, we should say so” – but then he immediately warns again that we should not “purposely exaggerate the possible timing of that end in the false hope that this will help mobilize people.”

Like Yuen, Gindin warns that “environmental catastrophism ... may just reinforce a sense that we are doomed and can’t really do anything about it ... [or] encourage people to jump aboard illusory market-based ‘solutions’.”

In my *Monthly Review* articles, I showed that there is simply no evidence for, and a wealth of evidence against, the claim that talking about environmental crises causes apathy or strengthens the right. Rather than repeat those arguments, I want to raise three questions about the supposed problem of “environmental catastrophism,” which Gindin evidently believes is a real problem in the left today.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Angus, “The Myth of ‘Environmental Catastrophism,’” *Monthly Review*, September 2013; Eddie Yuen, “Reply to ‘The Myth of ‘Environmental Catastrophism’,” *Monthly Review*, December 2013; Ian Angus, “A Reply to Eddie Yuen,” *Monthly Review*, December 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Gindin, “Unmaking Global Capitalism,” *Jacobin*, June 2014; Brad Hornick, “On the Environmental Question, Sam Gindin Has Got It Wrong,” *Rabble*, July 3, 2014; Sam Gindin, “Reply to Hornick: If Only...,” *Rabble*, July 4, 2014. All three articles have been republished in *The Bullet*.

## **1. Does anyone on the left actually claim that the end of the world is 20 years (or even a few decades) away?**

Ecosocialists and other environmental activists frequently discuss projections made by scientists about how long current CO2 emission levels can continue without causing tipping points between, as the noted British climate scientist Kevin Anderson puts it, *dangerous climate change* and *extremely dangerous climate change*. The fight to build a better world will become much more difficult if such thresholds are crossed, so it is important for us to know when they may occur, and what their physical and social impacts might be.

But to my knowledge no one – *literally no one* – says the world will end if we don’t radically change capitalism by then.

We’ve come to expect such misrepresentation from right-wing climate change deniers – the people who invented the label “environmental catastrophism” as an insult – but not from serious radical scholars.

## **2. Is anyone on the left purposely exaggerating the crisis in order to overcome mass passivity?**

As we’ve seen, some on the left argue that the public can’t handle the truth about the environmental crisis. They say we should temper our message lest we frighten people into apathy or conservatism.

Most ecosocialists and other green lefts take exactly the opposite approach. The social and ecological revolution we envisage requires decisive action by a knowledgeable majority, so it is our duty to get the facts out to the broadest possible audience. As the great socialist ecologist Barry Commoner wrote: “I have chosen to speak out about the scientific evidence of the origins of the environmental crisis; the alternative courses of action that might resolve it; and the right of the public – rather than propagandists or scientists – to make that choice. This was my duty to science, to the people whom science must serve, and to the survival of a civilized society.”<sup>3</sup>

We tell the truth as best we can, but climate change is a complex subject, so we may not always do this as well as we should. If Sam Gindin disagrees with what we write, I hope he will tell us how to improve.

But there is no justification for impugning the motives of radicals who are seriously trying to translate scientific findings into popular articles and action programs.

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<sup>3</sup> Barry Commoner, “Reply to Ehrlich and Holdren,” *Environment*, April 1972.

### 3. Should the fight against climate change be a priority for socialists today?

This is the most important question. For many on the right and a few on the left, accusations of “climate catastrophism” are code for “climate change isn’t very important.” I hope that isn’t Gindin’s view, but his articles are not clear.

The closest thing to a mass environmental movement in North America today is the fight against the extraction, transportation, and use of fossil fuels. Across the United States, anti-fracking protests have mushroomed, and the fossil fuel divestiture campaign has won significant support on many campuses. In Canada, campaigns against pipelines and tar sands exploitation have mobilized tens of thousands in meetings, rallies, and marches, won legal decisions and a municipal referendum, and have helped many to better understand the anti-environmental nature of the profit system. These campaigns are explicitly connected to a host of critical social issues, including internal colonialism and indigenous rights, public health, food, and water safety – and, of course, to global warming.

So I’m surprised that Gindin doesn’t say one word about those campaigns, let alone urge socialists to take part. Instead, he tells us to “frame the issue of the environment” by linking it to a list of progressive concerns that he oddly calls “a broader struggle,” although none of them is currently the focus of any significant movement at all.

Movements such as the fight against pipelines, fracking, and tar sands are responding to a global process that, as John Bellamy Foster recently wrote, “is progressively erasing previous distinctions between workplace exploitation and environmental degradation – as capitalism universally undermines all real-material conditions of production.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than trying to reframe these movements to fit a socialist-business-as-usual mold, socialists should celebrate and build them – and learn from them.

It is only by building actual movements for concrete objectives like stopping pipelines and fracking and coal mining that millions of people can come to understand the need for broad social change – and it is only by participating in such movements that socialists can develop and promote a credible program for 21st century socialism. If we believe that we have exclusive possession of the revealed word – or if we act as if we do – we will be irrelevant to the real movement, which will develop in directions and ways that we cannot predict.

Although he says that “we face a grave environmental crisis,” Gindin doesn’t seem to agree that in our time every serious socialist must be an active environmentalist – that socialists must be ecosocialists. Indeed he seems to counterpose socialism and environmental activism, asserting that what he calls “permanent protest” is a distraction that “replaces the politics of transformative change.”

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<sup>4</sup> John Bellamy Foster, “The Epochal Crisis,” *Monthly Review*, October 2013.

If the environmental crisis is as serious as the best science says, then a “politics of transformative change” that doesn’t place a high priority on resisting capitalism’s war on the planet will be unable to carry through any serious change at all.

There is much in Sam Gindin’s articles that I agree with, and I’m pleased that he is participating in the ongoing discussion on how to challenge capitalism in a time when the organized left is weak. I’m disappointed that he appears not to grasp the significance of the global environmental crisis for socialist politics and strategy. I hope he now understands that “environmental catastrophism” is a red herring that doesn’t contribute to serious discussion within the left.

Above all, because I respect his many contributions to struggles for social justice, I look forward to seeing him on the front lines of this battle as well.

*Ian Angus is editor of the ecosocialist journal *Climate & Capitalism*, and co-author of *Too Many People? Population, Immigration, and the Environmental Crisis* (Haymarket, 2011).*

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## **The Environment and Capitalism: Response to Ian Angus**

**by Sam Gindin**

The most critical question confronting anyone concerned with the environmental crisis is the political one: how to build a social force able to do something about it. The most important division among social activists is not between those who think an environmental collapse is imminent and those who think we will continue to stumble on in an ever-uglier, degraded world. It is between those who believe that personal recycling, technical fixes, market incentives and green jobs can solve the environmental crisis, and those who argue the solutions are necessarily much more radical, extending to a challenge to capitalism itself.

The urgency of the crisis demands acting now. But if a solution demands ending capitalism – something that is not on the immediate agenda – then trying to spur people into action by overstating, whether intentionally or inadvertently, how little time we have before ‘the end’ (a finite point left quite undefined and open-ended yet consistently alluded to) is likely to lead to fatalism, not an expanded activism. This is the basic argument of those criticizing ‘environmental catastrophism’. This should have led to a debate over how we do mobilize people around both the environmental threat and replacing capitalism with an environmentally-sensitive socialism. Instead, eco-socialists like Ian Angus have gone on the attack, dishonestly accusing critics of trying to hide the truth and cheaply linking us to right-wing environmental deniers. In regards to addressing reality, I could not have been clearer: ‘we should start from the truth’. This applies as much to those trade unionists who understate the actual

threat out of concern for the particular jobs they are linked to, as it does to those who overstate the case to scare people into action.

Angus argues that environmental catastrophism is a red herring. Had he simply argued that critics have exaggerated how prevalent it is, that would have been one thing. But to insist that it doesn't exist at all, that there is 'not one' example of this, strains credulity. When environmentalists mobilize around the issue do all of them really never turn to language that suggests more than urgency and never suggest that the world is on the brink of collapse? A good many Marxist economists have repeatedly predicted the imminent collapse of capitalism and the decline of the American empire; others have prematurely warned of peak oil undermining global industrialization. Would Angus really want to lock himself into asserting that this kind of argument has never occurred among environmentalists? Can one not both praise early critics of the environment and also suggest that some of them were prone to apocalyptic overstatement?

It seems to me that emerging from this increasingly unproductive debate are three crucial questions. First, how do we soberly assess the current strength of the movement? Second, how do we win the working class to more than progressive resolutions and moderate support? Third, how do we balance the often contradictory objectives of broadening the movement and radicalizing it?

## **1. Assessing the Movement**

The mobilization that has occurred via the environmental movement is impressive and, as Ian Angus has rightly long emphasized, it includes great potential to raise a socialist challenge to capitalism. I do not, however, understand why pointing to certain limits – as supporters – raises so many hackles. Though gains have been made, the movement hasn't been able to substantively affect the trajectory of capitalism and, in an effort to explicitly avoid a sense of fatalism from a sense of catastrophe, the green movement (including the big ENGOs) has embraced incremental and market-based solutions. We are losing, not winning, even on a terrain that would seem most fertile. Among other things, the movement hasn't had much success in generating a deep commitment from the critical constituency of labour, and environmentalists remain internally divided on what it will take to win.

## **2. Bringing the Labour Movement In**

The labour movement, for all its weakness, still has crucial resources and potential economic leverage, but if it is not won over to radical environmentalism, it may in fact be mobilized against significant progress. It is easy enough to tell workers that the environmental movement's program includes a 'just transition' so that those affected will get other jobs with comparable standards. But workers know we don't have the power to guarantee any such planned transition. This is an imposing dilemma.

Some of us have argued that the only way to resolve it is to incorporate the environment into a broader social agenda. Angus is apparently concerned that this will only obscure any environmental focus, as if class-based questions of environmental justice can be left out of any fundamental anti-capitalist re-thinking of the ecology of production and consumption. In fact, such a broader approach is the only way to both overcome key barriers to mobilizing around the environment and build the base for eventually taking on capitalism. Addressing equality and strengthening social programs to support people experiencing dislocations brought about by radical reductions in carbon emissions; raising the importance of the public sector and collective consumption against profitability, competitiveness, and consumerism; advancing job strategies for responsible production – all this is not distinct from the politics of the environment but fundamental to it. (There is of course always a danger that within such a broader mobilization the priority of the environment will be eroded, but that is a matter of framing the issues and organizing around them, not rejecting the larger mobilization.)

### **3. Internal Divisions**

It hardly needs stressing that eco-socialists are not the leading force within the environmental movement today. The movement includes – and not just as marginal groupings – social democrats who think that solutions can be found within capitalism via technocratic re-engineering of production; libertarians and anarchists who reject, to varying degrees, the organizational structures that can take on capitalism and capitalist states; and the most varied kinds of relatively apolitical green entrepreneurs and consumers, who don't see any possibility for transforming capitalism and so work within capitalist markets as the main solution. Operating within a movement in which the left is not dominant always raises difficult tactical questions, especially so in a movement that has grown rapidly. Do we look to the lowest common denominators to further grow the movement and postpone divisive questions about capitalism or insist on bringing capitalism into the discussion from the start? How do we balance this quandary?

In trying to understand the vehemence of the response of Angus and others, I can only conclude that they see the questions posed by some socialists as distancing themselves from the environmental movement. This misreads the critics. No socialist can ignore the environmental threat, the politics it opens up and the great urgency of a whole set of issues it raises, not the least being the increasing dislocations being produced by climate change. But tensions within the left are inevitable. This is so most generally because we are at a moment when the socialist left as a whole is struggling with, and divided over, how to make socialism relevant again. In this context, the environmental crisis adds particular contradictions that further affect the left: the contradiction of trade unionism as an institution representing particular interests not the class; the radical nature of what needs to be done versus fighting for reforms within capitalism; and the high degree of unevenness of the environmental movement itself.



The challenge is how to ensure that our debates, rooted in different experiences and perspectives, are both a check on our own thinking and – however sharp they might be – contribute to collectively moving on. I look forward to such constructive exchanges.

*Sam Gindin was Research Director of the Canadian Auto Workers from 1974-2000 and is now an adjunct professor at York University in Toronto.*

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## **The Real Environmental Problem Is Catastrophe, Not ‘Catastrophism’**

**by Ian Angus**

Dear Sam:

I was pleased to receive and publish >your response to my article, “Once Again on ‘Environmental Catastrophism’.” The left can only gain from frank and open discussion of our differences.

But I’m concerned that we’re spinning our wheels. As labour and green activist Terry Moore says in “An Activist Comments on the ‘Eco-catastrophism’ Debate,” there has been “more heat than light and a lot of ‘talking past each other’ without real engaging on the key points being raised.”

So in an attempt to lower the heat, I will just explain as clearly as I can what bothers me about what you have recently written about the environmental movement and crisis, and suggest an alternative approach.

In *Jacobin*, you discussed “Nine things to know about organizing in the belly of the beast.” Despite its importance, you only mentioned the environmental crisis under one of the nine points, and the main thing you said was *don’t exaggerate*. More precisely, you strongly condemned what you called “catastrophism,” “crisis mongering,” and “fearmongering” about the environmental crisis. In your subsequent responses to Brad Hornick and me, you defended those statements. Obviously you consider this to be a major problem.

But you have provided no evidence that exaggeration is a big problem for the movement, nor do you cite any actual exaggerations. That makes your concerns difficult to discuss, but I’ll try.

### **How Serious Is the Crisis?**

As Marxists, our starting point must be material reality. With regard to the global environmental crisis, that means we need to know what science tells us about what is happening to the biosphere, what will happen if current trends continue, and what measures are needed to end the crisis.

Although there are disagreements on details, the overwhelming scientific consensus, expressed in the latest IPCC reports, is that the changes caused by greenhouse gas

emissions are very near the danger zone, and if we don't radically reduce emissions soon, the effects will be catastrophic for many living things, including most of the world's poorest people. In the long term, climate change could make the earth uninhabitable by humans. Many scientists think the IPCC underestimates the seriousness of the crisis, in particular regarding how close we are to dangerous tipping points and how quickly we must act.

In the book on catastrophism that I reviewed for *Monthly Review* last year, Eddy Yuen accused climate scientists, including the highly respected James Hansen, of sounding "a shrill note of catastrophism," and warned radicals against the effects of "scientific catastrophism."

Since you also worry about "catastrophism," it's important to know if you share Yuen's opinion that the left should distance itself from science and scientists. If you do, then we have a serious disagreement and won't agree on what kind of movement to build.

But if you agree that the scientific consensus is the essential baseline for environmental action, then our disagreements are secondary and we can start discussing how socialists can help build the movement to fight climate change.

## Is Exaggeration a Real Problem?

You said that environmentalists are harming the movement by saying that the world will end in a few decades – in your reply to Brad Hornick, you said "in two decades." You didn't just say they are mistaken, you said they are *purposely exaggerating* in order to win support.

Many people, including the IPCC, say that we must take decisive action in a few decades. But I've never heard anyone other than religious nuts seriously predict that the world will end in a few decades, and I'm not aware of any environmentalist *deliberately misrepresenting* the science to gain support. So I asked you for proof.

I wondered what your answer would be. You could have replied: "I was exaggerating for polemical effect. What I should have said was ... ." Or you might have said: "Here are some actual examples of leftists deliberately exaggerating the environmental crisis by saying the world will end soon."

Either way, the road would have been opened for a constructive discussion on what the real situation is and what problems we must solve – as you say, "we should start with the truth."

But you didn't answer at all. Instead you wrote:

*Angus argues that environmental catastrophism is a red herring. Had he simply argued that critics have exaggerated how prevalent it is, that would have been one thing. But to insist that it doesn't exist at all, that there is 'not one' example of this, strains credulity. When environmentalists mobilize around the issue do all of them really never turn to language that suggests more than urgency and never suggest that the world is on the brink of collapse?*

As anyone who reads my article can see, I said nothing of the sort. What I challenged was your specific claim that in order to win support, some unidentified environmentalists purposely make a claim they know to be false – that the world is going to end in a few decades, possibly as soon as 20 years. I do not know of a single example of that, and you haven't cited a single example either.

You then referred to the mistaken views of peak oil theorists and some Marxist economists. Those may indeed be examples of “catastrophism” in other movements at other times, but they are not relevant to our current discussion. Nor, I should add, are they examples of purposely exaggerating for effect: those writers were wrong, but they weren't lying.

But let's set aside the absence of evidence for your specific claim, and agree that some overzealous environmentalists sometimes use “language that suggests more than urgency.” Since we really do face a serious crisis, I'm not sure what would qualify as “more than urgency,” but I won't quibble.

Are such statements really so harmful that they had to be the only environmental movement problem mentioned in your list of “nine things to know about organizing in the belly of the beast”? Are they really more damaging than Malthusianism, or primitivism, or support for market solutions, or any of the other political confusions that beset the movement? Above all, are they more important than the enormous influence of climate change deniers and the corporate propaganda machines?

To be frank, I think your concern with exaggeration is exaggerated.

## **What Should Socialists Do?**

So my third question was: “Should the fight against climate change be a priority for socialists today?” but once again you didn't answer. You did tell Brad Hornick that “no socialist can ignore the environmental threat,” but “not ignoring it” can scarcely be called making it a priority.

I asked that question not just because of your repeated warnings against exaggeration, but because your article was completely silent about the fight against the fossil fuel industry, an actual mass environmental movement that is developing before our eyes. It is very far from perfect, and has a long way to go before it accomplishes its goals, but as Marx said, “every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs.”

If we agree with Marx, then supporting and building the real environmental movement, while finding ways to advance ecosocialist ideas within it, will take precedence over worries about imperfect statements some participants might make.

## **Summing Up ...**

A discussion such as this needs facts, not unsupported assertions.

If some environmentalists are making statements that damage the movement, we need to know who they are, what they are saying, and how the damage is manifested.

If you think we are exaggerating the crisis, you need to be explicit: what do you think the unexaggerated truth is, and how does that relate to what the IPCC and other scientists say?

I've tried to state my views on these issues clearly. I accept the main conclusions of the latest IPCC reports as a basis for understanding and explaining the crisis, although I think scientists like James Hansen are probably right that the IPCC understates the problem. And in my experience what you call "catastrophism" is rare and mostly harmless: the many environmentalists I know and work with try hard to tell the truth, and if they exaggerate it's a mistake, not a conscious policy.

I strongly believe that accusations of "environmental catastrophism" don't belong in discussions among socialists.

As for how important the environmental crisis is for socialists in the twenty-first century, I agree with the noted Brazilian climate scientist and ecosocialist Alexandre Costa: "The fight to avoid a catastrophic outcome to this crisis engendered by capitalism is the fight to safeguard the material conditions for the survival with dignity of humankind... . Socialism is not possible on a scorched Earth."

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