"**Human Being is by Nature a Political Animal**"
(Aristotle, *Politics*)

"**Barbarism or Socialism**" **(K. Marx)** - "**Kyoto or the Apocalypse**" **(Green saying)**

"**The Labour Party's crowning achievement is the death of politics. There's nothing left to vote for**"
(Noel Gallagher, rock star, The Independent, 11 Nov 2006, p. 37

"**Against thoughts of the end and catastrophe, I believe it is possible and necessary to oppose a thought of political precariousness**" **Jacques Ranciere, Introducing Disagreement, Angelaki, 9(3), 2004, 3-9. page 8**

"The end of the socialist alternative, then, did not signify any renewal of democratic debate. Instead, it signified the reduction of democratic life to the management of local consequences of global economic necessity. The latter, in fact, was posited as a common condition which imposed the same solutions on both left and right. Consensus around these solutions became the supreme democratic value"   (Rancière 2004a: 3-4)

CHOSEN BY BRITAIN'S TOP CHEFS

ON THE EDGE

Greenland ice cap breaking up at twice the rate it was five years ago, says scientist Bush tried to gag

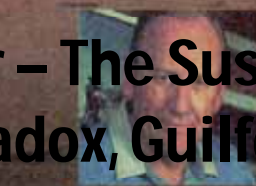# Sustainability as Post-Political Populisms

In Gibbs/Krueger – The Sustainable Development Paradox, Guilford Press

BY JIM HANSEN

A satellite study of the Greenland ice cap shows that it is melting far faster than scientists feared – twice as much ice is going into the sea as it was five years ago. The implications for rising sea levels – and climate change – could be dramatic.

Yet, a few weeks ago, when I – a Nasa climate scientist – tried to talk to the media about these issues following a lecture I had given calling for prompt re-

lic affairs team – staffed by political appointees from the Bush administration – tried to stop me doing so. I was not happy with that, and I ignored the restrictions. The first line of the mission is to understand and protect the planet.

This new satellite data is a remarkable advance. We are seeing for the first time the detailed behaviour of the ice streams that are draining the Greenland ice

sounds like a lot of ice. But this is just the beginning. Once a can reach a tipping point beyond which break-up is explosively fast. The question is how close we are getting to that tipping point. The summer of 2005 broke all records for melting in Greenland. So we may be on the edge.

Our understanding of what is going on is very new. Today's forecasts of sea-level rise use

grate over a thousand years or more. But we can now see that they are almost worthless. They treat the ice sheets like a single block of ice that will slowly melt. But what is happening is much more dynamic.

Once the ice starts to melt at the surface, it forms lakes that empty down crevasses to the bottom of the ice. You get rivers of water underneath the ice. And the ice slides towards the ocean.

200 cubic kilometres of ice a year. It is different from even two years ago, when people still

PREAMBLE

- **Nature's Acting as Clear and Present Danger**

- **Politically Evacuated Sustainability – A (post)-politics of consensus and the end of politics**

- **The Duplicitous Scientist: From matters of fact to matters of concern**

- **The Present Political Condition: neo-liberal and neo-conservative, post-political, populist and consensual**

- **Sustainability Policy as a mode of interaction that forecloses the political (the emergence of a post-political condition)**

- **Thinking the Political**

The Argument

1. There is no such thing as a singular Nature around which a policy of 'sustainability' can be constructed. Rather, there are a multitude of natures and a multitude of existing or possible socio-natural relations. The category of 'Nature' is an empty (or floating) signifier, one that requires a quilting point (point de capiton) through which meaning is woven (CO2, for example, functions as such quilting point).

2. The obsession with a singular nature that requires 'sustaining' is sustained by an apocalyptic imaginary that forecloses asking political questions (i.e. questions that recognise the constitutive split of the people) about possible socio-environmental trajectories and is inherently reactionary

3. The singular, but floating, meaning of Nature permits all manner of unlikely alliances to form some sort of consensual coherence; one that covers up the constitutive 'split of the people'.

4. Environmental issues and their political 'framing' contribute to the making and consolidation of a post-political and post-democratic condition, sustained by populist gestures, one that actually forecloses the possibility of a real politics of the environment.

5. I conclude with a call for a politicization of the environment, one that is predicated upon the recognition of the constitutive split of the people and of radically different possible socio-environmental futures.

The Desire of the Apocalypse

Global Warming and Ozone Loss: Apocalypse Soon

Sea levels likely to rise much faster than was predicted

Global warming is causing the Greenland ice cap to disintegrate far faster than anyone predicted

Global warming '30 times quicker than it used to be'

Climate change: On the edge *(all quotes from the Independent, 17/02/06)*

WATER WARS (Independent, 28/02/06)

The Four Horsemen of Industrial Society: War, Over-Population, Climate Change & Peak Oil *(Published on 12 Jan 2006 by Energy Bulletin)*

Pentagon warns Bush of apocalyptic climate change by 2020

An Inconvenient Truth (A. Gore)

Apocalyptic Attractions

- **It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (F. Jameson)**
- **Universal (we are all victims…)**
- **Homogenising (… despite differences)**
- **Apocalyptic future imagined with respect to stable, benign (but lost) earlier condition**
- **External – Man made but nature's revenge**
- **Unnamed – It has no proper name**
- **Tomorrow**
- **Elitist**
- **Non-political – non-partisan**
- **ONE NATURE**
- **➔ POPULIST – Foreclosing the political**
- **-> A convenient truth: how to change without changing anything**

"A specter"…. That has No Name

"A specter is haunting the entire world: but it is not that of communism. ….. Climate change - no more, no less than nature's payback for what we are doing to our precious planet - is day by day now revealing itself. Not only in a welter of devastating scientific data and analysis but in the repeated extreme weather conditions to which we are all, directly or indirectly, regular observers, and, increasingly, victims." (M. Levene, University of Southampton)

Post-political (Populism)

- The post-political is defined (by a.o. Zizek, Mouffe, Ranciere, Badiou, Hallward) as a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that covers up the constitutive split of 'the people'.

- Post-politics reject ideological divisions and the explicit universalisation of a politics of recognition, of naming, and of counting.

- Instead a consensus has been built around the inevitability of capitalism as a social and economic system, parliamentarism as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive, but 'de-caffeinated' cosmopolitanism as a moral foundation.

- Difficulties and problems, such as environmental concerns that are generally staged and accepted as problematic, need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. The key feature of consensus is "the annulment of dissensus .. The 'end of politics'" (Ranciere, 2001: §32).

Post-political (Populism)

- However, consensus does note equal absence of fundamental conflict, but in the absence of real politicisation, the only position of real dissent is that of the traditionalist or the fundamentalist.

- The post-political environmental consensus, therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental possibilities and of human-human and human-nature articulations and assemblages. It holds on to a harmonious view of nature that can be recaptured while re-producing if not solidifying a liberal-capitalist order for which there seems to be no alternative. The point is to change radically so that nothings has to change: sustainability as intrinsically reactionary.

- Much of the sustainability argument has evacuated the politics of the possible, the radical contestation of alternative future socio-environmental possibilities and socio-natural arrangements, and silences the antagonisms and conflicts that are constitutive of our socio-natural orders by externalising conflict.

Post-political (Populism)

➔ **Environmental policy, Sustainability policy and, in particular, climate change debates are not only expressive of the post-political condition, but are active and key arenas through which this post-political consensus becomes constructed.**

(Post-political) Populism

Environmental Populisms (Laclau, Mouffe, Zizek, Worsley):

– Invoking 'THE' people (if not Humanity as whole in a material and philosophical manner). All peoples (as well as the non-human) is under threat.

– Cuts across ideological and social differences. It is predicated upon a common threat or challenge to both Nature and Humanity.

– Based on a politics of 'the people know best' (although the latter remains often empty), supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy.

– Short-circuiting reasoning (IPCC - Nobel prize committee)

– Direct relationship between people and political participation (participatory governance)

– Invoking Apocalyptic futures ('streams of blood', 'water wars', 'on the edge')

(Post-political) Populism

- No privileged subject as agent of social change

- Populism proper always proposes that the enemy is externalised. The 'enemy' is always vague, ambiguous, socially empty, homogenized, vacuous (the 'immigrant', the 'proletarian', 'co_2', 'climate', 'environment'): no proper names are assigned. The 'enemy' is a mere thing, not socially embodied, named, and counted.

- Problems, therefore, are not the result of the 'system' as such or a fatal flow inscribed in the system (but an outsider). That is why the solution can be found in dealing with the 'pathological' phenomenon, the 'excess', the resolution for which resides in the system itself (Kyoto). It is not the system that is the problem, but its pathological (or 'excessive') symptom (for which the cure is internal, i.e. marketization)

- Populism becomes expressed in particular demands (get rid of immigrants, reduce CO2) and is addressed to the elites. It is a call on the elites not to change but to undertake action. A non-populist politics is exactly about transforming, if not obliterating, the elites.

- No proper names are assigned to post-political political politics (Badiou). It is associated with a politics of NOT naming in the sense of giving a definite or proper name to the its domain or field of action. Only vague concepts like climate change policy, biodiversity policy, or sustainability policy replace the proper name of politics.

- Populist tactics do not solve problems, it moves them around (nuclear option as CO2 alternative; geographical displacement of pollution/waste, etc…)

In conclusion

- The socio-ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism are external side-effects; they are not an inherent and integral part of the relations of gobal neo-liberal capitalism.

- A strictly populist politics emerges here; one that elevates the interest of 'the people', 'nature', or 'the environment' to the level of the universal rather than aspiring to universalise the claims of particular socio-natures, produced environments, or social goups or classes.

- These side-effects are constituted as global, universal, and threatening: they are a total threat, of apocalyptic proportions.

- The 'enemy' or the target of concern is thereby continuously externalised.

- The 'enemy' is always vague, ambiguous, and ultimately vacant, empty, unnamed.

- The target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical governance.

- The evacuation of the political from the calculative spaces of governance.

- Demands become depoliticised and 'radical' politics is not about demands but about things: no positively embodied name.

- A genuine politics "demands the restructuring of social space" (Zizek, 1999: 208), the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition and the naming and counting of the socio-ecological spaces that can become