

Reflections on the Green Economy
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The remarkable Indian Eco-Feminist Vandana Shiva has observed that market-based societies practice three forms of colonialism – the colonization of nations and peoples, the colonization of women, and the colonization of nature. These oppressive structures combine in a fluid and dynamic synthesis that generates incredible suffering and destruction: poverty, wars, and ecological crisis. The imperative that drives market-based societies to colonize is profit maximization, never-ending accumulation.

If US progressives are to participate in the emerging green economy, our starting point must be an unconditional rejection of the "three colonialisms", and the creation of an economic model (experiment, venture) that stands as a hopeful and democratic alternative to the neo-liberal, model that presently dominates in the US and much of the world. The emerging green economy presents an incredible opportunity for the environmental justice community to help develop a social movement that can shape this nascent green economy, an opportunity created by our history and base in working class communities of color, and by the critical fact that the economy cannot fully develop without massive infusions of public money, i.e., our tax dollars. There is a huge market for this economy in the public sector alone: greening our government procurement budgets, greening public buildings, schools and government offices, cleaning up existing

pollution, the green restoration of highly polluted communities (e.g., building and maintaining park space, community gardens, etc.).

This new economy can mature in either of two directions: one dominated by corporate power and along a path similar to that of the Silicon Valley, which produced vast fortunes for a tiny number of white men, generated well-paying jobs for a small strata of highly-educated professional and technical workers, many often “imported” from South Asia, and exploiting a vast army of mostly women of color assembly line workers (many of whom suffered serious health impacts from the production process), and causing enormous environmental damage. This is one model that the green economy can emulate, and is a path that will inevitably be pursued by corporate America, absent a broad, inclusive and powerful countervailing social movement.

On the other hand, because the green economy cannot fully emerge without public monies – for research and development and markets -- a progressive social movement can help to shape it in a way that is equitable, democratic, and environmentally sustainable. In order to play that role, this social movement must have clear principles and goals.

The overarching goal is to help the country transition from fossil fuels to clean energy and genuine sustainability. Fossil fuel production and consumption is destroying the earth, as can be seen most visibly in the devastation of Iraq, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and most pervasively in the horrifying advance of global warming. Domestic US energy usage contributes one quarter of the Greenhouse Gases that cause global warming, and we must add to this the greenhouse gases generated throughout the empire, by US companies and military bases abroad. The transition from fossil fuel is

concretely a matter of planetary life-and-death. The world absolutely cannot survive if we consume all of the gas, coal, and oil left in the ground.

The principles that should guide our efforts must enable us to create an economy that is the polar opposite of the three colonialisms identified by Vandana Shiva. These principles are equity, eco-justice, democracy, and international solidarity. Equity means that the opportunities and benefits of this new economy should be directed primarily at those communities most in need – that is, poor urban and rural communities, especially those with large numbers of people of color. Unquestionably, these communities have suffered the most from neo-liberal economics – deindustrialization, deunionization, trashing of the social safety net, elimination of public sector jobs, and the criminalization of social problems. Our society has an obligation to rebuild these communities and the green economy provides us with an opportunity to do so. Equity in this case means access to the entire range of green jobs, the development of small and medium size business infrastructure (including worker cooperatives), locating green research and development institutes in these communities, and investing in a comprehensive educational infrastructure (k-12 through higher education), to train and educate working class people of color and poor whites to effectively participate in the green economy. In many ways, a transformative green economy could help to revitalize public education in our inner cities and poor rural areas while teaching future generations of our children how to respect, protect, and restore Mother Earth.

Eco-justice is an important principle that means that all elements of the green economy should be directed towards halting global warming and addressing the global ecological crisis, directing our efforts first towards restoring a green environment to those

communities most horribly impacted by polluting industries, such as inner city communities and areas in Appalachia that have been environmentally demolished by coal production. Eco-justice means comprehensive, community-based research of environmentally-caused health problems in low income communities of color. And if we are to site green manufacturing jobs in or near communities of color and poor rural communities – decisions which should only be made with the full participation of the affected communities -- we will need research to clean up the green manufacturing process, for example the production of solar panels, which is now a very toxic industry. Eco-justice also means common sense, such as not replacing fossil fuels with nuclear energy.

Democracy should also be a central principle of our green economic model. By democracy I mean transparency in decision-making, and public participation at all levels of the decision-making process with the support needed to make this happen (translation, childcare, transportation, assistance). But democracy should also mean a majoritarian, which is a worker and woman-centered economy, one that pays a living wage and provides good health benefits, and in which at least the larger companies should provide paid maternity leave and childcare. The green economy must be one whose production does not harm the health of its workers, especially the reproductive health of women. Lastly, democracy means the unrestricted right to organize into unions, free from company intimidation and pressure.

The new green economy should be based on true internationalism, not corporate globalization. Internationalism or international solidarity means that any green investment or technology transfers from the Global North to the Global South must not

deepen the economic dependency of the Southern countries. We hear a lot of talk these days about how the wealthy countries of the north, those mainly responsible for the global ecological crisis, are going to “help” countries of the third world to acquire green technology. We know from historical experience that this could easily result in increasing the foreign debt of the third world nations, and transferring their wealth to wealthy nations like the US. A genuinely internationalist green economy would not create such a regime, but would instead institute low cost or even free green technology transfers. One way that this could happen would be to eliminate the massive foreign debt obligations of many third world nations so that they could direct those monies to building their own green economies.

Internationalism also means not having the racist and paternalistic attitude that the US has nothing to learn from third world nations about sustainable development, energy conservation, and living in harmony with nature. Our green economy should welcome the opportunity to learn from the incredibly rich experiences of the peoples of the Global South in building ecologically sound and sustainable economies.

I realize that the ideas I am sharing with you today are very provocative and not often heard in the ubiquitous conferences and symposia about the green economy taking place these days. These ideas are based on CBE’s long experience organizing working class communities of color, my own varied experience as a labor, campus, and community organizer, and on an analysis of the domestic and foreign impact of the neo-liberal economic model. Finally, it is based on some of the most visionary ideas that emerged from the civil rights, labor, women’s, and environmental justice movements during decades past. I am what you might call a realist-based dreamer. I believe that we

have an incredible opportunity at this historic moment. The overwhelming majority of the US public supports strong government action to address global warming and to improve the environment. The overwhelming majority are sick-and-tired of the war in Iraq and the economic policies that have caused the recession and driven our nation into the deepest debt in its history. The people of California and the US are, to quote a prominent politician, ready for a change. A transformative green economy could be that change, a model not only for creating jobs and business opportunities, but for addressing racial and environmental injustice, for empowering workers and women, for expanding democracy. It creates the possibility for broad alliances between environmental, environmental justice, labor, civil rights, and women's organizations. And it offers us the opportunity to begin a new conversation with the people of California and the US about changing the way we all live, about not defining our lives by consumption, but rather by our collaborative relationships with each other, by truly rewarding work, and by a nurturing relationship with our Mother Earth.