

2020 May 10 **Thoughts on Planet of the Humans**

First off, let's note that against my better judgment I'm writing again about Planet of the Humans, not because I want to praise Gibbs and Moore or bury them, but because I've needed to get my thoughts straight after the shock treatment the film is.

Then, let's admit that Moore may have screwed up, that the Planet of the Humans documentary by Jeff Gibbs he produced makes some serious errors and that -- as many environmentalists and climate scientists have said -- it may very well do more harm than good to the climate movement, especially by making (millions of) people who are not familiar with the science and history of the movement think (as the climate deniers say) that the whole Fossil Free effort is bogus, a scam racked with lies and unfounded claims perpetuated by wrong-headed mainstream (and probably unpatriotic) environmentalists.

Let's agree that the Gibbs documentary among other things showcases his personal animus (the film often seems more like a docu-drama or vendetta of some sort rather than fair and objective reporting); that it's largely composed of decade-old footage and that alternative energy technology (solar and wind in particular) have made impressive improvements since then and that Gibbs, for whatever reasons, does not make that clear in the film, leaving the viewer to assume the reportage is current when it's not, that we've made no significant improvement in the situation when we demonstrably have (depending on how you define 'significant' -- it's undeniable, for instance, that the role of nonrenewables in renewables production is not much reduced from what Gibbs decries).

In addition, let's note that on the basis of that out of date information (specifically about the use of biomass as an alternative energy source) Gibbs throws well-known and highly-respected climate activists like Bill McKibben and organizations like the Sierra Club under the bus without reporting that both have been up front about being wrong ten years ago and have since (since at least 2016) corrected course and have worked diligently and with considerable success toward a fossil-free future. (Those familiar with Moore's past films may find here an echo of the controversy surrounding his juggling of chronology in his 1989 documentary, 'Roger and Me').

(These and other negative points and fact-checking about the film can conveniently be found listed in Josh Fox's 30 April article and its links in The Nation:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/planet-humans-film-moore/>

and his 1 May 2020 interview on The Hill's TV show 'The Rising':

<https://youtu.be/iTYJCAxIOgs>

For other points of view, see Gibbs' and Moore's in-person response on the 28 April 2020 'The Rising':

<https://youtu.be/iTYJCAxIOgs>

and these two articles (plus comments) from Counterpunch and Common Dreams:

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/04/27/the-meltdown-of-the-careerist-greens/>

<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/05/05/real-problem-michael-moores-new-film-planet-humans>

and a Google search for "positive reviews of Planet of the Humans")

But in the carnage of Gibbs' hatchet job

let's not lose sight of the film's main points (which are in line with Moore's previous work and which may be the main reason he lent his name to the production).

1) That the road to a civilization free of fossil fuels is long and anything but straight and isn't to be found on any map; that it goes through a lot of ethical twists and practical turns, distasteful compromises and steep learning curves; that the goal isn't going to be achieved anytime soon (not while any of us alive today is still living); and that in-the-know proponents of Green New Deals and the like have not exactly leveled with the public about all the inevitable sidetracks, blind spots, nuances, tradeoffs, breakdowns and emergency repairs, indefinite but prolonged timelines and unsavory fellow travelers (for instance, longterm reliance on nuclear energy projected by even the most rigorous green plans). "The big crisis of our time," says Vandana Shiva at one point in the film, "is that our minds have been manipulated to give power to illusions."

2) That tech fixes alone (more efficient solar cells, batteries, wind turbines, etc.) haven't gotten us anywhere near where we have to go (e.g., the 350ppm atmospheric carbon disaster mark was passed years ago) and aren't going to get us there but will have to be accompanied by significant and difficult-to-achieve social, economic and political changes in our globalized (aka neoliberal) consumerist (aka capitalist) culture (aka the world political economy) -- not least a curtailing of our unsustainable world population (nearly 8 billion now, growing by 81 million more each year);

[Sidebar 1: The call to address overpopulation head-on may be the most controversial thing in this film. First raised to wide public notice in a variety of studies in the 60s-70s (Club of Rome, Donella Meadows, Paul and Anne Ehrlich, et al), the population/carrying capacity issue was brought, as one important part of the broad subject of sustainability, to the UN Earth Summits in 1972 and 1992 where it met with the overwhelming objection of people of color and the global South, who (given the atrocious history of North-South oppression, forced sterilization, eugenics, genocide, etc, etc) have good cause to object to proposals for population control.

The mainstream environmental movement was so shaken by this backlash (and in the US by the uproar of the religious right's opposition to abortion) that it essentially pulled out of that fight and focused (and continues to focus) instead on necessary but not sufficient tech fix approaches like those currently advocated by the IPCC -- tech fixes being about the only kind of approach allowed by the UN nations which (like the corporate interests they are advised by) by and large refuse to fund research into possible socio-political solutions (birth control, for example, being

verboden in US aid programs). Meanwhile, the ambiguous notion of sustainability (or even more ungainly UN term "sustainable development"), has been perverted into the pro-development promotion and land-use planning joke (cf. "sustainable profits") the term is today.

But: yes, people of color and the global south have reason in plenty to be wary of any talk of population control; and yes, the climate/environmental footprint of the industrialized North (where more affluence seems to mean fewer children per capita but more consumption) is far greater than the South and so warrants more immediate attention; and yes, racist hate groups do call for population control in the abhorrent sense (and are only too glad to circulate this film as support of their position).

But overpopulation nonetheless is a problem -- not only from North and white perspectives -- that should not continue to be ignored or deferred as it has been, or shunted off as a concern solely of white supremacists and the northern hemisphere rich jealous of their wealth. Recognition of the need for education about birth control and family planning -- especially among women -- is widespread among peoples worldwide (though badly underfunded and without sufficient official support).

And, as recently emphasized by the UN and other international bodies, overpopulation is a problem bound to become even more urgent as climate change and the spread of global consumerism transform the economy of the South.
End sidebar.]

3) That our efforts at climate mitigation to date, and our hopes for the future (and yes, the very groups we've trusted to guide us -- for the most part, liberal mainstream NGOs), have increasingly been co-opted by the plutocratic technocracy that brought about the climate mess we're now in, is fairly obvious to anyone who looks.

[Sidebar 2: the infiltration of corporate capital into the environmental movement is maybe most noticeable (and disturbing) in the number of seats held by corporate representatives on environmental organizations' boards of directors (the notion of grassroots organization being defined precisely by the absence of such seats). By such definition, the number of grassroots groups in the influential mainstream is close to zero, as is the number of such organizations whose governing boards are elected by the organization's membership; hence the notion of a Big Green that takes its place alongside Big Business, Big Pharm, Big Ag, Big Media and the rest.

But it's also evident in the number of mission-defining grants awarded to NGOs by large corporations and other big bucks mega-donors (cf. Gibbs' spotlighting of billionaire Michael Bloomberg's relation to the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign).

Less noticeable but even more pervasive is the corporate influence in every environmental regulation and piece of legislation which -- under standard "democratic" or "shareholder" procedures is necessarily a compromise between business interests (ie, capital) and public interest (health, environment, community, etc). Corporate and commercial influence is so ingrained that in effect, every piece of environmental legislation enacted, every environmental

regulation passed, is some sort of compromise at the expense of the environment and to the benefit of the expansion or security of capital.

The business of government is business, and this has never been more true than in the present era of neoliberal dominance. The goal of ever-increasing profit is intrinsic to capitalism and written into our legal fabric. The hopes of environmentalists to green up the commercial sector by cozying up to business interests or transform capitalist consumerism by co-sponsoring green products are delusory at best, and particularly shortsighted in the face of our immediate climate emergency.