

# Climate & Political Correctness: A Look at Leftist Ideology

By Scott Thompson

*Note: since this is an essay it doesn't have a geographical setting on this, much less any other, planet. In the absence of such a setting the photographs are from one of my backpacking trips to the Superstition Wilderness in Arizona.*

*Next best thing.*

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*"It will be objected that a constantly increasing population makes resistance and conservation a hopeless battle. This is true. Unless a way is found to stabilize the nation's population, the parks cannot be saved. Or anything else worth a damn."*

– Edward Abbey, 1967

Thirty years ago, as a neophyte counselor, I was learning something different. Which was: if you want to help a person who is mired in a seemingly unsolvable problem, find out in detail what they're doing to solve it and then tell them to do precisely the opposite. It works wonders – if you can persuade your clients to act against their deeply ingrained assumptions.

Forty years ago, as a neophyte Zen meditation practitioner, I was also learning something different. Which is that if you simply sit still and become aware of thought streams and emotions, no matter how upsetting they may be, and then learn to keep doing that through the day, they'll lose much of their power to upset you. Now I teach such meditation to others and they discover that it does work wonders – if they're willing to suspend their ingrained assumption that shoving away awareness of painful emotions is the best way to deal with them.

As a result of the foregoing, I suspect that plausible solutions to difficult problems, even where catastrophic consequences hang in the balance, are often not considered simply because they don't fit within a dominant paradigm. This may be the case both on an individual and a societal level.

This phenomenon may also apply to our ever escalating eco-crisis, and in particular to climate change. At this point I can't say (can anyone?) whether it's already too late to avoid a global catastrophe but it's safe to say that matters have been at a crisis level since at least 2008, with little progress toward phasing out fossil fuels and other greenhouse gases.

Is that because in developed countries anyway, we're so addicted to our relatively prosperous ways, and the most privileged people among us to their wealth and power, that collectively we can't bring ourselves to surrender them? Even to protect our own children and grandchildren and vulnerable people all across the globe, much less other species?



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This may well be the case and I have made such arguments in one way or another in a number of stories in *The Canyon Country Zephyr*. But in this story I'd like to focus on another possibility: that in the long run certain key aspects of our treasured concepts and assumptions just don't work.

The big picture may be as simple as that: that the very ideas and assumptions that have seemed to lead to such remarkable progress for humanity since the industrial revolution began are actually making things worse and that we've been too blind to see it and too stubborn to listen to those who do.

Not evil. Not bad. Not greedy (I'm hedging some on that one).

I want to begin by questioning one such cherished ideological tool, in this case of leftist politics: political correctness.

Some background. Financial and political oppression by the privileged and powerful of the poor and vulnerable seems to have been endemic to hierarchical societies ever since they emerged from the tedium and murk of large-scale agriculture. The Biblical

prophets were chewing on the big dogs' derrieres about this circa 2800 years ago, and hooray for them. Those who are blessed with material plenty and power to boot indeed need to help vulnerable people world-wide which they're generally too self-preoccupied to do without massive external social pressure.

So the political left has an honorable and necessary societal function; I'm not questioning that.

But I suspect that what's been gumming up the works when it comes to dealing with climate change in particular derives from Marxism's ideas about class struggle, which remain more influential than we might care to admit. It carefully divides societies into the oppressor class and the oppressed and then forges this distinction into a rigidly effective ideological and political tool. A tool that is every bit as unbending as Biblical fundamentalism and which imposes desired social changes through ostracism and public shaming. Which is effective in keeping people from thinking things through.

The essential assumption behind class oppression is that the suffering of the oppressed class derives almost entirely from the behaviors and dastardly scheming of the oppressor class. Therefore the presumptive blame for just about any individual or collective problem within said oppressed class must fall upon the oppressor class.

Only one thing can instill enough fear to maintain such a rigid distinction on a social level: speech codes. Which work as follows. If any member of the oppressor class says anything that is critical or arguably disparaging about any member of the oppressed class, or that attempts to redirect responsibility for the key problems, the speech code is ipso facto violated. The speaker is then subjected to social shaming if not ostracism. Within this framework a career or reputation built up by decades of hard work can be demolished by a single ill-considered sentence.

Why is it so important to continue directing the fire of blame right at the oppressor class and also to greatly minimize any criticisms of the oppressed class or its members? One reason, an honorable one, is to rid societies of prejudices and to protect the already oppressed from further burdens. But another, the pernicious one, is that if more wide-ranging criticisms and assessments circulate enough throughout societies they may dilute the perceived antagonism between the oppressors and the oppressed, thereby weakening the political influence of the liberal-left.

So no, it's not just about holding the designated oppressors accountable in a responsible way, though that's essential. It's about labeling them as the bad guys and keeping that flame of resentment against them burning hot, thereby preserving the left-leaning party's influence.

Let's see how these premises of political correctness obstruct dealing with a difficult and admittedly sensitive aspect of climate change: human overpopulation.

Note the following from Naomi Klein, author of *This Changes Everything*, her emerging 2014 classic on climate change. On page 114 she states: "...the roughly 500 million richest of us on the planet are responsible for about half of all global emissions. That would include the rich in every country in the world, notably in countries like China and India, as well as significant parts of the middle classes in North America and Europe." A rightful assertion on her part, surely.



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But watch out for her footnote: "This is why the persistent positing of population control as a solution to climate change is a distraction and moral dead end. As this research makes clear, the most significant cause of rising emissions is not the reproductive behavior of the poor but the consumer behaviors of the rich."

What just happened here? It takes a moment to figure it out: she's just made an amazingly vast assumption sound so normal that it could float past all of our heads. Yet here it is: that those who are overwhelmingly responsible for reducing the scope of a natural disaster are those who have played the largest per capita role in causing it. Not those who could now greatly reduce its impacts through prudent behaviors of their own.

Of course she's right that those who have primarily caused the greater eco and climate crises should rightly bear the lion's share of the financial and other remedial responsibility. What this means to me is that the prosperous, powerful, and privileged either knew

or should have known the seriousness of the situation and nevertheless failed to take timely, appropriate action to prevent it or minimize its effects. But does that free the rest of us from responsibility where our own actions can make a significant difference in reducing the cataclysm's impacts on our fellow humans and other creatures?

An analogy here is a family's recovery from the impacts of a family member's drug or alcohol addiction. Yes, the addict bears primary responsibility for admitting the problem and then getting the treatment necessary to get and stay clean and sober. And for making amends for harms caused and for righting financial damage as well. But in the real world the addict's efforts alone are seldom sufficient to foster the family's healing. Family members, despite their very real innocence, need to work on recovery too, usually through counseling and 12-step work of their own. That's when love within the family can blossom once again.

I think the situation is similar on an immensely larger scale in the case of climate change and the greater eco-crisis. The people of the Earth as a whole need to take responsibility for the impacts of overpopulation and reduce them as much as possible, with of course generous financial assistance from those with the bulk of the money and other resources. And this isn't just about humanity's well-being. The survival of many, many other species populations depends on whether we humans are willing to get serious about what the carrying capacity of each ecosystem for human beings is.

Now for political correctness's enforcement mechanism, ostracism and public shaming. The following is a paragraph-long quotation from a five page article, "The Population Myth," written by George Monbiot in *The Global Warming Reader*, Edited by Bill McKibben in 2011. Monbiot is described as a British journalist and activist whose work often appears in the *Guardian* newspaper. Here's the happy quote:

"It's no coincidence that most of those who are obsessed with population growth are post-reproductive wealthy white men: it's about the only environmental issue for which they can't be blamed. The brilliant earth-systems scientist James Lovelock, for example, claimed last month that "Those who fail to see that population growth and climate change are two sides of the same coin are either ignorant or hiding from the truth. These two huge environmental problems are inseparable and to discuss one while ignoring the other is irrational." But it's Lovelock who is being ignorant and irrational." (p. 269.)

As I said before, public shaming is the enforcement mechanism for political correctness. Its use against a person who has made a forbidden statement or brought up a forbidden issue, must include labeling him (or her) as a member of an oppressor ste-

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reotype. So let's take two of Monbiot's defining criteria for the stereotype with which he attempted to shame Lovelock and see if either holds up to even cursory scrutiny: were "most" white males at the time they first seriously raised the issue of overpopulation really "post-reproductive"? If not, then being "post-reproductive" can't be meaningful as a criterion for the stereotype; otherwise Monbiot would be guilty of ageism; another political-incorrect-ism.

(I think he boxed himself in here.)

Let's now look at four white males who have most credibly raised the issue of overpopulation and see if "most" of them - hell, any of them - were "post-reproductive" when they did so.

I admit that strictly speaking I couldn't discover on Google whether Lovelock was "post-reproductive" when he first stated concern about overpopulation. But since he was born in 1919 and concern about this issue was widespread by the 1960s it seems unlikely that he was over 50 when he was first talking with people about it. That's not a "post-reproductive" male age.

The eminent Stanford scientist Paul Ehrlich was born in 1932 and first published his noted book, *The Population Bomb*, in 1968, when he was 36. Think he was post-reproductive then? Ha!

The author Edward Abbey was born in 1927. He finished writing his book *Desert Solitaire* in 1967, in which he notably expressed his concern about human overpopulation, quoted above. He was 40 at the time and his book was published the following year. No way was this guy "post-reproductive"!

Gary Snyder, the esteemed poet and student of Zen Buddhism, was born in 1930 and was expressing at least some concern about population growth by 1977, when he was 47. Not a "post-reproductive" age either.

So none of these deeply respected men were likely "post reproductive" when they first expressed their concerns. Much less "most" of them!

I also doubt that any of them could have been described as "wealthy" at the time when they first expressed concern about overpopulation (if they ever were). But given the facile nature of Monbiot's criteria I see no need to plow into that.

To sum up, I'm not dissing political incorrectness per se. Overall I follow its dictates myself day by day because I believe the overarching intent is indeed to protect the most vulnerable people in any society. But too often there is an ugly edge to the process that we see all too clearly in this case. Namely that the political left has a tendency to drum up much of its political support by encouraging the human tendency toward resentment and prejudice, specifically against members of the designated oppressor class, and by humiliating anyone who questions the rigid assumptions and simplistic thinking that buttress its ideology.

Bottom line: we don't have the luxury of ignoring the problem of human overpopulation simply because (1) it's a politically sensitive issue and (2) because addressing it may complicate the climate justice movement's classical leftist strategy of garnering resentment against the privileged people within developed countries. Its failure and the failure of related left-leaning activist organizations to make overpopulation an essential aspect of their grassroots movements validates my hypothesis that a key aspect of their political ideology leaves them unprepared to meaningfully address either the eco-crisis or climate change.

Are they willing to think differently?

No sign of it yet.

Note: although I'm 68 now, I've been expressing concern about overpopulation myself since my vigorous early 30s. And I've never been wealthy.



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