

PRISONERS OF ADDICTION AND ENVY

By Sajay Samuel

Planet of the Humans, directed by Jeff Gibbs, executive producer: Michael Moore, April 21 2021.

Zehner, Ozzie. *Green Illusions: the dirty secrets of clean energy and the future of environmentalism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012, pp.437

Jeff Gibbs remains the environmentalist he was as a young boy. Early in his *Planet of the Humans*, there is a clip of him tree-sitting in his backyard in Michigan. Why a documentary by an environmentalist should have become the object of a censorship campaign by a group of the most well-known names in the US environmental movement —Josh Fox, Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein —is, on its face, puzzling.

With Michael Moore as executive producer, the film was assured wide distribution and public attention. It was released on April 21 2020, the eve of Earth Day, for free viewing on Moore's YouTube channel. Barely a day later, Josh Fox who made his name for *Gasland* —a documentary exposing the dangers of fracking for natural gas—led a ['letter of outrage'](#) campaign against all those affiliated with the film. A week after that, in an [article](#) for the *Nation* magazine, he accused Michael Moore and Jeff Gibbs of producing a documentary that was not only 'wildly unscientific, outdated, full of falsehoods, and benefits fossil fuel industry promoters and climate deniers' but also 'an incitement to eco-fascist population controls.' His was one among a [slew](#) of articles, blog posts, and opinion pieces that quickly emerged to denounce the documentary.

What accounts for this level of invective among

apparent fellow-travelers? The documentary does show how many in the environmental movement — the Sierra Club, Bill McKibben, Van Jones — receive money from billionaires who stood to profit by promoting renewable energy. The documentary also details the alliance between finance capitalists such as David Blood formerly of Goldman Sachs and politicians such as Al Gore of ‘an inconvenient truth’ fame, who are pushing to ‘green the economy.’ Messrs. Blood and Gore, the movie shows, are only the tip of a growing network of industrialists, technologists, venture capitalists, academic entrepreneurs, and yes, environmentalists, who see a multi-trillion-dollar business opportunity in moving from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. It is this promise and the employment opportunities that go with it that also underwrite the ‘Green New Deal’ announced by Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez and Bernie Sanders.

If the movie simply showed that the environmental movement was influenced and even captured by money interests, that would not account for the reaction against it. After all, it is as American as apple pie to make a buck, particularly when the cause is good. It must have been something else that caused the critics of the film to agitate enough to have the movie banned from YouTube, which impelled PEN America, in reaction, to [condemn](#) these obvious efforts at censorship.

The scientific argument reviewed in the film and more fully explicated in the book *Green Illusions* by Ozzie Zehner is that the transition to and the maintenance of a completely renewable energy grid is both impossible to achieve in any reasonable timeframe and is destructive of the environment. This is not a straw man argument since ‘greening the economy’ means replacing fossil-fuels with renewable sources of energy to prevent or at least mitigate the effects of climate change. [Scientists](#) have contested this or that assertion made in the film. The website of the documentary has a tab titled

[‘Fact Check Bible’](#) which provides the sources for all the claims made. Much of the criticisms accuse Jeff Gibbs of using old data, of understating the efficiencies of renewable energy sources such as solar panels or of overstating the proportion of renewable energy derived from biomass and biofuels.¹

None of these criticisms, as far as I can tell, address the central issue: is it feasible to completely transition to a renewable energy grid and will that prevent climate change? The [work](#) of Mark Jacobson, an academic engineer at Stanford, is at the center of the claim that it is feasible to fully transition to an energy grid composed only of wind, water, and solar power. His work does not reflect settled science and has been repeatedly challenged by other scientists, including some [who](#) have argued that Jacobson’s ‘work used invalid modeling tools, contained modeling errors, and made implausible and inadequately supported assumptions.’²

Debate is endemic to the thing called science despite the uncritical use of such phrases as ‘follow the science’ or ‘science says.’ The big picture is often missed during a point and counterpoint debate. Total energy consumed in the US has risen by about 24 percent between 1990 and 2019, the year before the pandemic. Most of the energy produced is wasted, which, in 2019 for example, was about 67.5 percent of the energy generated. The increase in the amount of energy wasted between 2008 and 2019 was more than all the renewable energy added during that period. Over thirty years since 1990, the proportion of renewable energy sources to the to-

1 Those interested in exploring the nuances of the brouhaha surrounding the documentary and attempts to censor it should consult a detailed investigative report published online by the journalist [Max Blumenthal](#).

2 A whiff of the current scientific disputes over renewables can be had by consulting papers on the topic of ‘100% renewable electricity systems’ published in recent issues of [Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews](#), [Energy Policy](#), and [Sustainable Cities & Society](#), among other scholarly publications.

tal generated increased from 4 percent to about 11.5 percent. That renewables can increase to 100 percent in the next thirty years seems very unlikely, though debatable. Furthermore, that such a fully renewable grid can be had without extensive further damage to the environment —through extensive mining for minerals like cobalt, using fossil fueled energy to build wind turbines and blades, and so on — seems incredible, though again a matter for debate. Nonetheless, disputes over such scientific questions seem hardly sufficient to justify the kind of vehement reaction the film has elicited. Dissenters and doubters can simply discuss the relevant scientific research instead of calling for censorship.

A clue about what is driving the reaction of environmentalists is found in the accusation of racism and eco-fascism levelled against the film and its producers. The accusation is mounted in response to the observation made in the documentary, that the ongoing environmental crises cannot be solved while current levels of economic growth and consumption persist. Nowhere in the documentary is the phrase ‘population control’ used. Yet that is precisely what is read into it. And by expanding on what is not mentioned in the film, its critics remove from consideration any questioning of how we live today. What seems impossible for most of the critics to comprehend and to accept is the main point of the documentary and the book. It is growth in economic production and consumption, particularly in advanced industrial economies, that has been and continues to be the primary cause of climate change. Jeff Gibbs calls on his viewers, including the environmentalists he castigates, to be fully aware of this central truth.

To be aware of something is not simply to know it, as when one knows it is windy outside. Awareness implies action. When Bill McKibben promotes the production and sale of a Tesla instead of a Toyota, he is unaware that con-

tinued economic growth is the primary cause of the ongoing destruction of soils, airs, and waters. He and others who share his opinion fiddle while the world burns, mostly in places far away from the metropole. This is why Jeff Gibbs concludes ‘... there is a way out of this. We humans must accept that infinite growth on a finite planet is suicide...’

I briefly met Jeff Gibbs when he presented the documentary in State College and had time for a few remarks. I don’t recall bringing up Ivan Illich in that exchange. Nothing I have read since, including Zehner’s book, suggest either of them know Illich’s work. Half a century ago, Illich insisted that ‘political debate must now be focused on the various ways in which unlimited production threatens human life’ because ‘the environmental crisis...is rendered superficial if it is not pointed out that antipollution devices can only be effective if the total output of production decreases.’

The environmentalist movement and their capitalist and post-capitalist fellow travelers are committed to ‘greening the economy.’ To be committed to greening the economy is to be addicted to the trappings of a consumer society. And as Illich acerbically noted, ‘in a consumer society, there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.’ That is why *Tools for Conviviality* is barely comprehensible today and stands as a witness to the road not taken.