

# Book Review: How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth

Wednesday 15 October 2008, by [ANGUS Ian](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2008).

**Hervé Kempf. *HOW THE RICH ARE DESTROYING THE EARTH*. Translated by Leslie Thatcher. Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont, 2008. ISBN 978-1-60358-035-9.**

**Reviewed by Ian Angus**

**editor, Climate and Capitalism**

Contents

- [A multi-sided crisis](#)
- [Capitalism and Socialism](#)
- [Lifestyles of the Rich and \(...\)](#)
- [Human Nature and Overconsumpti](#)
- [Confusing cause and effect](#)
- [What \(if anything\) is to \(...\)](#)
- [In short ...](#)
- [AFTERWORD: THORSTEIN VEBLEN](#)

From the beginning, Climate and Capitalism has been devoted to “making the greens more red, and the reds more green.” So it was with great anticipation that I picked up a book that makes “a double appeal upon which the future success of everything depends: to ecologists, to think about social arrangements and power relationships; to those who think about social arrangements, to take the true measure of the ecological crisis and how it relates to justice.”

And the title! How could a socialist not love a book called *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*? A book that puts the blame where it belongs would be a huge improvement over all those it’s your fault because you didn’t change your light bulbs and start riding a bicycle books.

The author, Hervé Kempf, is the founder of the ecology magazine *Reporterre* and Environmental Editor of *Le Monde*. *Comment les riches détruisent la planète* (Editions Seuil, 2007), a bestseller in France, addresses two vitally important questions. Why does excessive use of resources continue, even though it is driving the world toward catastrophe? And what can we do to stop the drive towards ecocide?

There is much in this book that deserves careful reading and discussion. Unfortunately, the explanation he proposes doesn’t hold water, and the solutions he offers amount to little more than wishful thinking. In the end, *How the Rich are Destroying the Earth* is a disappointment.

## A multi-sided crisis

The first two chapters of *How the Rich are Destroying the Earth* describe the complex of interrelated crises that face our world.

Chapter 1 argues that global warming, the extinction of thousands of animal and plant species, and the generalized pollution of ecosystems can't be treated as separate problems.

*"The different environmental disturbances are, in reality, aspects of a single crisis. ...*

*"So, we must abandon the idea of separate crises, solvable independently of one another. That idea serves special interests only, for example, the nuclear-power lobby, which uses climate change to promote its industry."*

This is a very important insight, one that liberal greens consistently ignore. Solutions that focus only on reducing greenhouse gas emissions could harm the world in other ways.

Chapter 2 examines the worldwide growth of inequality. In the southern hemisphere, a billion people live in absolute poverty, surviving on less than a dollar a day. One-third of people in France, live in households that earn less than the minimum wage. In the United States, 23% of people earn less than half of the median income. In Japan, 25% of households have no savings and a million depend on social assistance.

Just as the various forms of environmental destruction are linked, so there is a connection between environmental degradation and poverty. Everywhere in the world, the poor live in the most polluted areas, so much so that poverty can be defined in environmental terms, not just by monetary measures. And the poor are the most affected by the growing environmental crisis. "Overall, poverty and the environmental crisis are inseparable ... they respond to one another, influence one another, and deteriorate in tandem."

Despite an awkward and overly-literal translation, these two chapters deliver a powerful message. Kempf assembles facts and argument effectively, and his writing resonates with deep moral outrage at the destruction of the earth and the impoverishment of its people. That, combined with his insistence that the social and environmental crises are tightly linked and cannot be solved independently of each other, make Kempf's first two chapters a powerful statement.

But it isn't enough to describe the problem. We need to understand why these crises exist, and what can be done to prevent catastrophe. That's where *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth* fails.

## Capitalism and Socialism

At several points in his book, Kempf seems to say that capitalism is the cause of the social and environmental crises he describes so well. At first I was puzzled by his failure to explain how and why the capitalist system is putting our world at risk — but it seems, although Kempf never defines his terms, that for him "capitalism" is not a social-economic system, but an ideology that favours material growth above all other values. As we will see, Kempf's criticisms of capitalism are really criticisms of material growth.

And for him, socialism is just as bad — it's just another ideology, parallel to capitalism and sharing its worst features. "The left remains pickled in the idea of progress as it was conceived in the nineteenth century ... and intones the chant of economic growth without the slightest trace of

critical thinking.”

Marxism and socialism aren’t actually discussed in this book; they are brushed aside in a few isolated sentences, as if their inadequacy were patently obvious. Socialism has simply been “incapable of integrating the ecological critique.”

This offhand dismissal of Marxism and socialism as alien to ecology would be more credible if Kempf gave any indication of familiarity with the substantial body of Marxist writing on just this subject. There is no mention in his footnotes of Joel Kovel, John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett, Michael Löwy or any other Marxist who has worked on “integrating the ecological critique.” He has nothing at all to say about Fidel Castro, who has spoken out repeatedly on environmental issues, or indeed about Cuba, the only country in the world that the WWF says meets its criteria for sustainable development.

Similarly, it is disturbing that Kempf says nothing about the green-left, red-green and ecosocialist currents and parties that exist in many countries. This is a serious omission in a book that calls for greens to address social problems and for the left to address ecology.

## **Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous**

Kempf’s analysis of the causes of the crises begins in Chapter Three, “The Powerful of this World.” It starts by declaring, correctly, that the world today is ruled by “an oligarchy that accumulates income, assets, and power with a zeal for greed not seen since the U.S. ‘robber barons’ at the end of the nineteenth century.”

Despite that powerful beginning, this chapter doesn’t discuss the oligarchy’s power at all. There is nothing about control of giant corporations, influence on government policies and political parties, domination of international markets through the World Bank and other institutions, or any other form of power.

What Kempf describes instead is the oligarchs’ exorbitant personal wealth. He reports on CEOs with multi-million dollar salaries and even bigger bonuses, and he details the opulent lifestyles of the hyper-rich who live in giant homes, vacation in exclusive resorts and buy grossly expensive toys. There’s even a paragraph on Paris Hilton, the celebrity heiress whose love life and shopping sprees are endlessly reported in the tabloids.

Hang on — Paris Hilton? What is she doing in this book? Obviously she is rich and spends money lavishly, but no one could reasonably describe her as one of the “powerful of this world.” She doesn’t even take herself seriously.

But Hilton’s excesses are very much to the point, because for Kempf, conspicuous consumption by the very rich isn’t just a symptom of the world’s problems — it is the primary problem, the root cause of all the crises we face. The title of his book is meant to be taken literally: the earth is being destroyed by the irresponsible behaviour of rich people.

## **Human Nature and Overconsumption**

Kempf bases his argument on *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, a book published in 1899 by the American social critic Thorstein Veblen. In Kempf’s opinion, “Veblen’s thought is an essential key to understanding our era.” (See “Afterword,” below, for a discussion of Veblen’s views.)

In Chapter 4 of *How the Rich are Destroying the Planet*, entitled “How the Oligarchy Exacerbates

the Ecological Crisis,” Kempf summarizes Veblen’s explanation of conspicuous consumption.

Human nature — the “propensity for emulation” that forces us to seek to demonstrate that we are equal to or better off than others — causes the very rich to engage in conspicuous consumption and thus conspicuous waste. Everyone lower on the social scale is driven by the same human nature to copy them. This creates massive demand for unnecessary things, and keeps the economy in overdrive. And that excessive growth is now overloading the biosphere, leading to ecological crisis.

The global leisure class opposes the changes needed to stop the crisis from getting worse.

*“How? Indirectly by the status of its consumption: its model drags general consumption up by impelling others to imitate it. Directly, by control of economic and political power that allows it to maintain this inequality.”*

A reader may be excused for feeling that this is an anticlimax. The rich are destroying the planet by setting a bad example, and they don’t want to stop.

The solution is even more anticlimactic: the rich should stop setting a bad example.

*“The only way you and I will agree to consume less material and less energy is if the material consumption — and consequently the income — of the oligarchy is severely reduced. ... Since the leisure class establishes society’s consumption model, if its level is reduced, the general level of consumption will decrease. We will consume less; the planet will be better off; and we’ll be less frustrated by what we don’t have.”*

After all this, we’re left with a peculiar variant of trickle-down economics. If the rich consume less, we will do likewise. And since “growth has an enormous and harmful effect on the environment,” the most important thing we can do is consume less.

## **Confusing cause and effect**

There is no doubt that massive waste and unnecessary production are important issues, but there are two fundamental problems with Kempf’s analysis.

First, despite rejecting Gross Domestic Product as a measure of prosperity because it ignores environmental destruction, Kempf falls into a parallel trap: he treats growth as a single, all-bad metric. But all growth is not the same. There are profound differences between building more limousines for the rich and growing more food for the hungry, between manufacturing weapons and building houses, between mining tar sands and building wind farms.

The problem we face is not how to reduce production, but how to redirect the entire economy away from destructive production, and into production that restores ecosystems and reduces inequality. While Kempf’s proposal might cut the amount of consumption, it’s hard to see how it would affect the nature of production.

Second, and more important, Kempf, following Veblen, gets the relationship between production and consumption exactly backwards. If the “propensity for emulation” is such a powerful feature of human nature (Veblen says it is second only to the “instinct for self-preservation”) why does the trillion-dollar advertising industry exist? Why do the capitalists devote so much time and money to manipulating people into buying? Why did U.S. banks put immense resources into convincing people to sign mortgages they couldn’t afford?

The answer is that growth isn't a response to consumer demand. Capitalism functions through competition between capitalist firms, each seeking to maximize its own profit. The internal logic of capitalist production is grow or die: A capitalist who chooses not to grow will soon be marginalized by the capitalist economy, and eventually will have no more capital.

Corporations can survive only by constantly expanding production and profitability. But they can't make profits unless they sell the ever-increasing volume of products they produce — and that's why they spend billions to persuade us to buy more. As one observer comments:

*"Capitalism ... has become expert in a new branch of manufacturing: the manufacture of desires. The genius of contemporary capitalism is not simply that it gives consumers what they want but that it makes them want what it has to give."* [1]

In other words, the problem is not conspicuous consumption as such, but the profit system that makes conspicuous consumption both possible and necessary.

### **What (if anything) is to be done?**

By accepting Veblen's theories, Kempf has painted himself into a corner. Human nature causes the super rich to engage in conspicuous waste, and human nature causes the rest of us to emulate them. So how can the rich be persuaded to override their human nature and consume less?

He adds even more wet paint by describing the oligarchy's determined efforts to undermine democracy and block change, through the so-called war on terror, massive expansion of prisons, criminalizing protest and deploying "total surveillance." "Democracy," he says, "has become antithetical to the objectives the oligarchy seeks."

This hostility to change is so strong that Kempf speculates that part of the oligarchy actually "harbors an unconscious desire for catastrophe" because ecological collapse, chaos or nuclear war would be the ultimate forms of conspicuous consumption.

In response, Kempf can only plead that reduced consumption is important, so "pressure must be brought to bear on the rich, which will cause it to be accepted — in negotiated forms — by the body of the citizenry."

Who can bring enough pressure to override the oligarchy's self-interest and willingness to subvert democracy? He suggests three forces:

- The "social movement," is important, but it can't succeed unless "the middle classes and part of the oligarchy" decide to "take sides for public freedoms and the common good."
- Most of the media is controlled by the oligarchy, but some journalists "could be galvanized around the idea of freedom."
- The left is "wobbly" and "displays an almost cartoonish refusal to truly engross itself in environmental issues," but it is essential to the process. If it can be "reborn by uniting the causes of inequality and the environment" it could play a key role. If not, the left and everything else will be swept away in general disorder.

Kempf is absolutely correct that the battles against inequality and for the environment must be brought together. But the coalition of forces he proposes doesn't include the people whose efforts will be vital in that fight: the main victims of capitalism's pervasive inequality and destruction. The

poor and oppressed worldwide, the Indigenous people who are playing a vanguard role in the defense of the earth, the workers whose health is weakened and whose lives are shortened by poisonous production, the farmers whose livelihoods are being destroyed by global warming and agribusiness — those are the forces that will change the world. Disaffected oligarchs and honest journalists will be welcome as allies, but they are unlikely to play a central role.

When the majority now excluded from wealth and power unite to exert their democratic will, they will not be violating human nature. In building what Marx described as a “free association of producers,” they will open new possibilities for personal development, community solidarity and life in harmony with the world around us. The name of that transformation is socialism.

### **In short ...**

*How the Rich Are Destroying the Planet* starts out far better than most recent books on ecological and social problems. Unlike most writers, Kempf understands that environmental and social problems are closely linked, and that solving them will require profound social changes, not just individual actions and new technologies. His first chapters are very worth reading for just that reason.

But he doesn't follow through. Instead of a radical critique of the social order that has brought the world to the brink of disaster, he opts for a pseudo-scientific theory of human nature that made little sense when it was proposed in 1899 and makes none today. As a result, he misunderstands the root causes of the problems he describes so well, and provides no basis for action to solve them

---

## **AFTERWORD: THORSTEIN VEBLEN AND THE LEISURE CLASS**

Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) is best known as the originator of the term “conspicuous consumption.”

Radical sociologist C. Wright Mills called him “the best critic of America that America has produced.” Marxist economist Paul Sweezy praised him as an early analyst of corporate behaviour in a monopoly economy. Another Marxist, John G. Wright, described Veblen as “one of the few outstanding original thinkers in America,” and said that his book on the influence of business in universities “marks the peak of liberal social thought in America.” [2]

But Veblen wasn't a radical or a Marxist — he was a liberal critic of the excesses and absurdities of American society in his time. He wrote slashing critiques of high society, but he never proposed or supported any program for social change.

*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which Kempf believes explains today's ecological crises, was Veblen's first book. It was also his most popular, although its sales success seems to have resulted from the perception that it was actually a witty social satire. His descriptions of the ultra-rich and their hangers-on are often very funny, but his explanation of why such a class exists boils down to that old favourite explanation-that-doesn't-explain, unchanging human nature.

In Paul Baran's words:



*"Veblen's wisdoms of last resort are always of a biological or psychological nature, have always something to do with 'basic' racial characteristics of men or with the no less 'fundamental' structure of their motivation. Leaning heavily on the psychology of William James, he conjures up a number of 'instincts' conveniently tailored to suit his particular requirements, and treats them as permanent characteristics of the human race."* [3]

Social theories based on unchanging human nature face two intractable problems. They can't account for the wide variations in human behaviour and social arrangements in the world today and in history. And they can't explain, or allow any hope for, social change or improvements in the human condition. That's why conservatives like such theories: if today's social order is the product of eternal human nature, then any attempt to change it is futile.

Veblen attempted to escape that trap by postulating "two main divergent variants of human nature" — peaceable and predatory. Darwinian natural selection determines which variant is dominant in any society or class.

Peaceable humans dominated in the earliest societies, but predatory humans eventually seized wealth and power, becoming a "leisure class" devoted to war, religion and other wasteful, non-productive pursuits. Their personality traits — competitiveness, desire for power and status — tended to "breed true" within the leisure class right down to the present.

Veblen's leisure class was not equivalent to what Marxists call the capitalist class. He divided economic activity into two categories: pecuniary and industrial. Pecuniary activity is non-productive: it focuses on the ownership and acquisition of wealth as such, the domain of the leisure class. Those who succeed in pecuniary activity need to be good at shrewd dealing, unscrupulous management and fraud — the class includes financiers, bankers and merchants, joined by priests, professors, soldiers, lawyers, and others who aren't super-rich but whose activity involves "no taint of usefulness."

The peaceable variant of human nature still exists — Veblen thought it was more stable in the long run — but the cooperative, truthful and honest instincts of that group mean its members can not accumulate great wealth. They are, however, likely to succeed in what he calls industrial pursuits, related to the actual production of useful goods and the improvement of society.

The members of the leisure class long ago accumulated more wealth and physical goods than they could possibly need or use productively, so their instinct for competition causes them to compete for status instead. Veblen's view, as John. G. Wright wrote, was that at some point "the struggle for existence passed into the struggle to keep up appearances." [4]

The only economic goal of members of the leisure class is to expand their ability to engage in the "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous waste" that proves they are very, very rich — richer than most of us, surpassing their peers, and catching up to those who are richer than them. For Veblen's leisure class, C. Wright Mills wrote:

*"mere idleness was not enough: it had to be the idleness of expensive discomfort, of noble vice, and costly entertainment. It had, in short, to be conspicuous consumption, the obvious waste of valuable good as a means of gaining reputability."* [5]

They use their wealth and power to ensure that improvements in industry are directed not to the betterment of humanity, but to increasing their personal wealth, and thus to ever more wasteful consumption.

And since the "propensity for emulation" is a fundamental feature of human nature, all the lower classes follow suit, demanding more and more useless products to demonstrate our status.

“Each class envies and emulates the class above it in social scale .... All standards of consumption, are traced back by insensible gradations to the usages and habits of thought of the highest social and pecuniary class — the wealthy leisure class.”

Constant economic expansion is not, as Marx argued, driven by the internal logic of production for profit. Rather the economy is driven by human nature, by the fundamental human instinct to keep up with the Joneses. Our lives are governed by what Veblen calls the “Law of Conspicuous Waste.”

Veblen’s account of human nature was pure speculation — he offered no evidence, no footnotes, no sources. His theory depended on powerful human instincts and economic laws that were unknown to science in 1899 and haven’t been found since. And we haven’t even considered his weird division of western industrial society into three “three main ethnic types; the dolichocephalic?blond, the brachycephalic?brunette, and the Mediterranean.”

*The Theory of the Leisure Class* was one of the best works of social criticism of his time, and is still worth reading today. But Veblen’s attempts at scientific explanation didn’t make much sense in 1899 and have not aged well. Indeed, anyone who seriously proposed such theories today would be rightly dismissed as a crackpot.

---

## Footnotes

[1] Timothy Garton Ash, “Global capitalism now has no serious rivals. But it could destroy itself.” , February 22, 2007.

[2] C. Wright Mills. “The Theory of the Leisure Class.” In Irving Horowitz, ed. *Veblen’s Century*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick NJ. 2002. p 107. Paul Sweezy, “Monopoly Capitalism,” *Monthly Review*, October 2004. John G. Wright. “Thorstein Veblen, Sociologist.” *New International*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1935. Online at

[3] Paul Baran. “The Theory of the Leisure Class.” *Monthly Review*, Summer 1957

[4] John G. Wright, op. cit.

[5] C. Wright Mills, op. cit. p. 114.