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Addressing Seriously the Environmental Crisis: A Bold, “Outside of the Box” Suggestion for Addressing Climate Change and other Forms of Environmental Destruction

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Addressing Seriously the Environmental Crisis: A Bold, “Outside of the Box” Suggestion for Addressing Climate Change and other Forms of Environmental Destruction

Abstract

Recognizing the severity of the environmental crisis facing humans across the planet, while focusing on the United States, this paper proposes a program that addresses the environmental crisis while providing for economic security for all Americans. It revolves around a drastic reduction of production, and a corresponding limiting of work by each person. It develops and put forth principles that any alternative program must advance, and specifically discusses the rationale for the program presented. In short, while not sure this program would ever be adopted, nonetheless, it is advanced to stimulate further thinking as to how human beings across the planet can mobilize to stave off the existential crisis we all face.

Keywords

Climate Change, Social Equity, Universal Basic Income

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Cover Page Footnote

Kim Scipes, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University Northwest-Westville Campus in Westville, Indiana, USA. He is a long-time labor and political activist, and has been teaching a course on “Environment and Social Justice” since 2006. His latest book is an edited collection: "Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization" (Chicago: Haymarket Books: April 2016).

Prologue

Despite many popular claims otherwise, scientific evidence overwhelmingly shows that we face an actual crisis in the well-being of humans, animals and most plants on this planet. The long and short of the situation is that—by current scientific knowledge and research—unless there are rapid and substantial changes in how human beings interact with and effect our environment by the year 2030, we shall see the beginning of extinction of the human race, animals and most plants by the end of this (21st) century.¹

There is a massive amount of research that has been conducted to support such a claim—see, among others, Foster, Clark and York, 2010; Harper, 2012; Mann, 2014; Klein, 2014; Angus, 2016; Romm, 2016; for a succinct but powerful account, see Jensen, 2016—and this is not being discussed or debated here: the evidence is compelling, it has been rigorously reviewed, and it is so severe that geologists and climate scientists are overwhelmingly accepting that we are now in a new epoch in geological history, which has been given the name of “The Anthropocene.” In other words, scientists are now recognizing that human behavior is having a greater impact on the planet than are natural processes (Angus, 2016).²

The primary actors are both modern corporations and nation-state leaders. These life-threatening actions are a product of our global capitalist economic system in its contemporary incarnations; militaristic nation-states’ actions, commonly known as “imperialism”; and domestic actors that support the production of fossil fuels and their derivatives to grow domestic economies.³ Again, these are not being discussed here, but has been generally well argued by Angus (2016), Foster, Clark and York (2010), McKibben (2012), Rasmus (2016), and Scipes (2016b: 28-36; 2016d), among others.

What *is* being discussed here is what to do about these problems. While this is only a preliminary program—it is sure to be debated and refined over time, if not rejected—nonetheless, it is an effort to go far beyond much of which has been advanced as solutions.⁴ In other words, it is an effort to seriously address the problem facing this threat to human existence in all of its intensity and complexity.

This article addresses three interrelated issues: survival of the environment, economic well-being, and social equity among humans. It has a global focus, although much of the discussion herein is limited to contemporary conditions within the United States.

Environmental Basics

While the temperature of the Earth has gone through a number of warming and cooling periods over many millennia, we know that for over 800,000 years, the carbon dioxide component of the atmosphere has never exceeded 300 parts per million (ppm). We know that at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, circa 1750, it was about 280 ppm. With a massive jump beginning right after World War II (circa 1948-1953)—known as the “Great Acceleration” (see Angus, 2016)—the carbon dioxide component of the Earth’s atmosphere exceeded 400 ppm for the entire year of 2016 (Jones, 2017).

Why is this important? It means our protection from the Sun's rays is deteriorating and, accordingly, its ability to protect the Earth is weakening.

The atmosphere that surrounds Earth is really just a collection of chemicals, held in orbit by the Earth's gravity. This chemical composition has generally held steady for the past 11,700 years or so, and has provided the conditions that have enabled human beings to create civilizations around the planet.

These chemicals that make up the atmosphere protect the Earth, diverting into space much of the solar energy emanating from the Sun and traveling toward Earth, while allowing some of this energy (which we know as "heat") to enter inside of the atmosphere to reach the Earth. Some of this solar energy that enters the atmosphere is also reflected back into space by ice that covers the planet, at various times and in certain regions. It has been this combination—keeping much of the solar energy outside of the atmosphere, and then reflecting back into space some of the energy that strikes the Earth—that has kept the Earth at a generally congenial temperature that has allowed human beings to flourish.

However, since the end of World War II, we humans have been emitting so many "greenhouse gases"—notably carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and methane (CH₄), along with water vapor—into the atmosphere that they have attacked the established chemical protection, and weakened it: this has allowed more solar power from the Sun into the atmosphere, heating the planet. At the same time, it has also contained more of the solar heat that enters the atmosphere, keeping it within the atmosphere. This warming has caused massive ice melting—especially in the Arctic, but also glaciers and the Antarctic as well—which, in turn, has reduced the ice coverage of the planet. This means that while even more of the solar energy has gotten through the atmosphere, more of that has remained here, as there's been less and less ice to reflect it out into space. In short, creating a positive feedback loop that is exacerbating problems.

It is these processes—the weakening of the atmospheric protection, a warming planet, and a reduction of ice coverage—that is leading to other problems. These include rising ocean waters, stronger hurricanes, climate disruption and change which is affecting agricultural production, a reduction of clean water, deforestation, more wildfires, increased extinction of other species, less biodiversity, reduced animal populations, etc. These each can often add to a warming planet, worsening our problems.

This additional heat is also affecting our oceans. The oceans act as an environmental "sink," capturing some of this heat, keeping the planet from warming even more. This, generally speaking, is a good thing. However, the oceans have now absorbed so much of this heat that they are warming—and are close to being unable to absorb any more; when this happens, the oceans will, then, be contributing to the further warming of the planet. This warming, along with pollution, is making the oceans more and more acidic. This, in turn, is affecting fish and ocean flora, such as plankton, which is the bottom of the aquatic food chain that about one-third of the world is dependent upon. It is also attacking coral reefs, which are homes for many small ocean animals that eat the plankton. This is all bad.

The world's forests also act as environmental sinks, similarly to the oceans. They capture (inhale) CO₂ and then, through the process known as photosynthesis, exhale

oxygen (O₂). Thus, they contribute directly to everyone's well-being. However, when the climate changes and they don't get the snow or rain that they are used to, forests dry out. Among other things, bugs that would normally get killed by cold temperatures no longer die, so they can further damage trees. When fire strikes, the trees are more vulnerable to it than in the past, and when a tree is burned, it releases all of the CO₂ that it has stored; again, contributing to additional planetary warming.

The point being made is that by producing greenhouse gases and releasing them into the atmosphere, we are causing other problems as well, and each threatening the well-being of humans, animals and most plants. In fact, scientists have established nine "planetary boundaries" that "are crucial to maintaining an earth-system environment in which humanity can exist safely":

Climate change is only one of these, and the others are ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, global freshwater use, change in land use, biodiversity loss, atmospheric aerosol loading, and chemical pollution. For the last two, atmospheric aerosol loading and chemical pollution, there are not yet adequate physical measures, but for the other seven processes, clear boundaries have been designated. Three of the boundaries—those for climate change, ocean acidification, and stratospheric ozone depletion—can be regarded as [at] tipping points, which at a certain level lead to vast qualitative changes in the earth system that would threaten to destabilize the planet, causing it to depart from the 'boundaries for a healthy planet'. The boundaries for the other four processes—the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, freshwater use, change in land use, and biodiversity loss—are better viewed as signifying the onset of irreversible environmental degradation.

Three processes have already crossed their planetary boundaries: climate change, the nitrogen cycle, and biodiversity loss (Foster, Clark and York, 2010: 14).⁵

It is clear, and incontrovertible, that the environment on this planet is under attack, and that the ramifications threaten the very existence of humans, animals and most plants. It is also clear that this crisis has largely been ignored by governmental and corporate "leaders"—and that the corporate media has enabled this to happen.

Economic Basics

However, how can we address the environmental crisis and take care of human beings in the process? Focus here is on the United States, but it is clear this is a global problem that must be entered into our thinking and programs to challenge global climate change and environmental destruction.

It seems absolutely necessary to ask this question of how can we take care of human beings in the process of combatting climate change and environmental

destruction: if we don't take care of people, how can we get them to demand that the environment be protected? And without their determined support, how will we ever force the powers-that-be to resolutely address these problems?⁶

Employment in the United States is in bad shape. There is not work for everyone who wants to work. And even for those who have jobs, the majority of incomes are decreasing, as the economy continues its shift from being industrially-based to one that is service-based, with its lower wages and salaries.

This author has been researching these processes for over 30 years. As demonstrated in a peer-reviewed article in 2009—and building off ideas first advanced in 1984 (see Scipes, 1984)—the global economy is changing, and that is hurting American workers. We went from a period where many workers had secure, good-paying jobs with increasing benefits and better working conditions, and strong unions, to where we are today, with insecure jobs, fewer and fewer benefits, pay that is not increasing if it's not actually decreasing, and most unions pretty weak, when they even still exist.

What happened? Basically this first period (1947-1973) was a period when the rest of the global economy was in bad shape, devastated by World War II, and the US—with its modern industry intact—was able to provide goods and services for most of the world. A strong union movement had forced US industrialists to share some of their profits—within the first year after the War, over 116,000,000 production days were lost to strikes, and this was joined by general strikes in cities like Oakland, California and Stamford, Connecticut, as well as several in Pennsylvania (see Scipes, 2009)—and this led to the emergence of a “working middle class” (Metzgar, 2000) that was able to consume the products of industry. Economic times were good.

By the late 1960s-early '70s, things had changed. The other industrialized countries had recovered, and they were able to economically compete with the United States. Initially, this was in their home markets, but eventually they began exporting into the US, and later, building production facilities inside the US, being better able to compete with US-based companies. Eventually, corporations emerged from some of the “developing countries” such as Brazil, South Korea and Taiwan, and they, too, began competing with US corporations.

Nonetheless, the money available to US government officials, plus money used to fight the war in Vietnam as well as maintain the US Empire around the world, was money that did not go into job creation, health care, education, infrastructure, etc., much less to combat climate change. Things got worse for most working people; between 2000-2005, the bottom 80 percent of the US population actually lost part of their family incomes. [This is all carefully documented in Scipes, 2009, which showed changes over time and explained what was going on, although the analysis stopped right before the Great Recession. See Rasmus (2016a) for a powerful analysis since then.] The Great Recession of 2008-09, and fifteen years of war in the Middle East, have also drawn resources away from most Americans.

The problem is that not only do Americans need work, but they need jobs that pay well. And there is nothing that even suggests this is possible for most Americans, on even a far-distant horizon. As far as this researcher can tell—and remember, he's been looking at these issues for over 30 years—there is nothing out there.

To the contrary, things are getting worse. While some of the job losses have been due to neo-liberal globalization (see Scipes, 2016a: 2-10), most of the job cuts have been because of the introduction of technology into the work place. In an article in the *New York Times* titled “The Long-Term Jobs Killer is Not China, It’s Automation,” Clair Cain Miller notes:

Take the steel industry. It lost 400,000 people, 75 percent of its workforce, between 1962 and 2005. But its shipments did not decline, according to a study published in the American Economic Review last year. The reason was a new technology called the minimill. Its effects remained strong even after controlling for management practices; job losses in the Midwest; international trade; and unionization rates, found the authors of the study, Allan Collard-Wexler of Duke and Jan de Loecker of Princeton (Miller, 2016).

Miller then continued, writing “Another analysis, from Ball State University, attributed roughly 13 percent of manufacturing job losses to trade and the rest to enhanced productivity because of automation” [see Hicks and Devaraj, 2015: 6, Table 4, covering the years 2000-2010]. She noted that the affects differed by industry: “Apparel making was hardest hit by trade ... and computer and electronics manufacturing was hit hardest by technological advances” (Miller, 2016). And then she drops the hammer:

The changes are not just affecting manual labor. Computers are rapidly learning to do some white-collar and service-sector work. Existing technology could automate 45 percent of activities people are paid to do, according to a July report by McKinsey. Work that requires creativity, management of people or caregiving is least at risk (emphasis added) (Miller, 2016). [See Chui, Manyika and Miremadi, 2016 for the original report.]

Joined with that reporting is a study done by Lawrence B. Katz of Harvard University and Alan B. Krueger of Princeton University, both members of the National Bureau of Economic Research, which focuses on “alternative employment” in the United States. What they found was “that the percentage of workers engaged in alternative work arrangements—defined as temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract company workers, and independent contractors or freelancers—rose from 10.1 percent in February 2005 to 15.8 percent in late 2015” (Katz and Krueger, 2016: 2). They discussed their findings:

A striking implication of these estimates is that all of the net employment growth in the US economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in alternative work arrangements. Total employment according to the CPS [Current Population Survey-KS] increased by 9.1 million (6.5 percent) over the decade, from 140.4 million in February 2005 to 149.4 in

November 2015. The increase in the share of workers in alternative work arrangements from 10.1 percent in 2005 to 15.8 percent in 2015 implies that the number of workers employed in alternative arrangements increased by 9.4 million (66.5 percent) from 14.2 million in February 2005 to 23.6 million in November 2015. Thus, these figures imply that employment in traditional jobs (standard employment arrangements) slightly declined by 0.4 million (0.3 percent) from 126.2 million in February 2005 to 125.8 million in November 2015. But it appears that as of late 2015, the labor market had not yet fully recovered from the huge loss of traditional jobs from the Great Recession (emphasis in original) (Katz and Krueger, 2016: 7-8).

What has all of this meant for people? The Pew Research Center released a national study on the “Shrinking Middle Class” in May of 2016. They found that “Nationwide, the median income of US households in 2014 stood at 8% less than in 1999,” with “median incomes falling in 190 of 229 metropolitan areas examined.”

The Pew study defined “middle income” as “adults whose annual household income is two-thirds to double the national median,” as adjusted for household size. “In 2014, the national middle-income range was about \$42,000 to \$125,000 annually for a family of three” (Pew, 2016: 5). Households in the “upper tier” received more than double the national median, while those in the “lower tier” received less than two-thirds of the national median.

American households in all income tiers experienced a decline in their incomes from 1999 to 2014. Nationally, the median income of middle-income households decreased from \$77,898 in 1999 to \$72,919 in 2014, a loss of 6%. The median incomes of lower-income and upper-income households fell by 10% and 7%, respectively, over this period (Pew, 2016: 10).

Ominously, “the 10 metropolitan areas with the greatest losses in economic status from 2000 to 2014 have one thing in common—a greater than average reliance on manufacturing” (Pew, 2016: 10). A report on Northwest Indiana (in the “rust belt”), where this researcher teaches, suggested the impact on this area:

... the number of adults in middle-income households declined in 203 of the 229 metropolitan areas, including the Chicago metro that includes most of Northwest Indiana and the Michigan City-La Porte metro that encompasses La Porte County. The middle class fell by 4 percent nationally between 2000-2014, a period when the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the United States lost 5 million good-paying manufacturing jobs.

Some of the steepest losses in middle class share of the general population over the last 15 years were in Indiana.... The Michigan City-

La Porte and Fort Wayne metros both posted an 11 percent decline in the economic status of its adult population, tied for the fifth steepest drop in the country.

The percentage of middle-income households in the Michigan City metro dropped to 57 percent in 2014, down from 63.2 percent in 2000, while the number of lower-income households skyrocketed to 27.1 percent, up from 18.3 percent of the overall population at the turn of the century. High-income households also fell to 15.9 percent of the overall population in La Porte County in 2014, down from 18.6 percent in 2000 (Pete, 2017).

In short, the economic situation for Americans has largely deteriorated over the past 15 years, and there is nothing to suggest that this trend will reverse itself in the foreseeable future. In fact, it is certain that technologically-caused unemployment will only increase over the years, while jobs being created will be “alternative arrangements,” meaning that most will have less pay and few benefits than traditionally.

So, with these deteriorating economic conditions worsening, in the face of increasing destruction of the environment, any program put forth to address the current situation must ensure the economic well-being of all Americans, do it as equitably as possible, and do it in a way that does not further devastate the larger global environment.

Principles that Any Alternative Program Must Advance

To begin thinking about these issues, there are some principles that we must address in any proposed program:

- The solution must be one that considers everyone in the world; in other words, we cannot focus only on events/solutions in the United States, but have to worry about consequences for people around the world;
- Along with that, there is no moral, philosophical or any other reason that can justify Americans (or anyone else) living qualitatively better than anyone else. That said, the change must take place over time, whereby we in the US and other developing countries begin reducing our impact on the planet toward that of peoples of the developing world, while giving space for them to increase their standards of living. This will not take place over night. Yet, we must begin significantly moving in that direction, so that people recognize that we are sincere in what we are saying and doing.
- This means we must renounce militarism and any efforts to dominate the world, especially by the United States, but by any other country; that means we’ve got to fight to reduce our “defense” budget by at least 90%.
- We must renounce any effort to consider the United States to be the “City on the Hill” or any other form of exceptionalism that suggests the US is beyond reproach, etc.; i.e., we have to renounce any form of US nationalism.
- Along with this, we have to be moving toward social equity within the United States: there is no reason for the 1% or .01% to live at a standard of living qualitatively greater than any other American. At the same time, the standard

of living between whites and peoples of color must move toward that of the other.

- Our economy must be re-oriented toward producing only socially-needed goods, and the goal must be to advance the well-being of all, and away from making a profit.
- Our goal is to take care of all people in our country and wherever we can make a difference in the world.

Program

We have to recognize that our industries produce a bunch of “crap” that is not needed—and that includes everything from cigarettes to 37 (or more!) different breakfast cereals to cars that get less than, say, 50 miles a gallon. That also includes a lot of junk that gets given as gifts, especially around Christmas time. We also have to quit putting high fructose corn syrup and other poisons in our food, and pesticides and herbicides on our crops. We have to reduce our production to as little as possible, while ensuring that any production being done is ecologically sustainable, and still ensure that our people get their needs met.

We need to take money out of politics, and place strict limits on campaign contributions. We need to limit how long people can serve in the same office, while insuring institutional memory within the system.

We need to reregulate the media, so that they cannot use their power disproportionately on our citizenry.

We need to improve our schools and our education system.

We need to equitably share what jobs are still available. We need to focus our emphasis on taking care of our own people, which includes expanding jobs in education and health care, institute a massive project to retrofit all buildings—governmental, commercial and residential—to meet high energy efficiency standards, expand mass transportation, and upgrade infrastructure. The energy system must be shifted to renewables (solar, wind, wave power), and off of fossil fuels and other non-renewables (such as nuclear).

We need to pay a living wage. The 2016 poverty threshold, established by the US Government, for a family of four was \$24,600 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016.)⁷ According to the latest research, there were 46.7 million Americans living under that poverty threshold (14.8 percent of the population), and 21.1 percent of those under 18 were living in poverty in 2014 (De Navas-Walt and Proctor, 2015: 12, 14—tables 4 & 5). There is a vast and growing amount of research showing the inadequacy of this amount, and the growing consensus among researchers across the country is that a *realistic* poverty threshold requires a *minimum* of \$49,200 (i.e., 200 percent of the official poverty line) to live a sustainable, although simple, life in the contemporary United States: if we use the 200 per cent level as a *realistic poverty threshold*, in 2014, 33.4 percent of the entire population lived in poverty in this country (De Navas-Walt and Proctor, 2015: 17-Figure 5). That means that a living wage would require a *national minimum wage* not just \$15/hour, but approximately \$25/hour!

We need to ensure that every person in this country has access to health care—including medical, dental and mental health care—and that this be funded out of general taxes.

How can we accomplish this?

Key to the program is to reduce production to a minimum, ending all socially unnecessary production.

With that, we must establish national health care and a minimum standard of living for all. This should be with incomes at least at 200% of the current poverty line.

We must cut our workforce by 75% in any given year. That means everyone will only work one year out of every four. In the years not working, the government will provide the minimum wage to each household (currently about \$49,200), initiating a guaranteed annual income to all, based on residence and not whether they work or not. Thus every person will be provided for during the years they don't work. This will reduce the need for everyone working, while taking care of everyone.

We must put an upper income limit for wages, salaries, investment income, capital gains, etc. All money above that limit shall be donated to the common pool, to support people during their off-working years.

Cut the military and military-related spending by at least 90 percent.

Rationale

If we are going to have a chance to save humans, animals, oceans and most plants on this planet, *we have to drastically reduce production*. Period. There simply is no other way. Anyone who argues otherwise must show how we can continue and/or increase production and save everything on the planet. This researcher has seen nothing that suggests this can be done; to the contrary, everything he's reading says we must drastically reduce production ASAP (as soon as possible).

That means, quite simply, that we must quit making profit—or even seeking profitability—as the overall goal of production. Although I am not a Marxist, I will put this in Marxist terms: we have to renounce producing for “exchange value” and adopt producing for “use value”; in other words, we have to totally reorient our economy to where production is minimized, and what production that remains must be for the well-being of everyone concerned. That also means that whatever production that still is done is done in the most sustainable manner possible, with reuse and recycling engineered into the product from the beginning.

This means there will be even less need for people to work for wages outside of the home. There has never been a period of capitalism where everyone who wanted a full-time job could get one, and I'm not even talking about being paid good wages; I'm talking about there's never been a time when everyone who wanted a full-time job could get one at any wage rate. This is true in the United States, and even more true throughout the rest of the world.

So, we have to make a choice. We can continue as is, where a smaller and smaller number of people have good paying jobs—although they usually have to work longer and longer hours to keep such jobs, meaning they have less and less time to share with families and friends—and more and more have bad jobs at increasingly reduced wages, and this is for those who can get work at all. Obviously, there are growing numbers of people who cannot get work and, despite all of the propaganda, I don't see this problem being seriously reduced at all. Or we can admit there's too much shit work needed to be done in today's economy, get rid of as much as possible, and then divide up the remaining work as equitably as possible. We have to recognize that there are a growing number of people who can do whatever work is needed—even those jobs requiring higher education (i.e., college-level jobs)—and yet the opportunities for each individual to get such a job are decreasing.

At the same time, and this has not been discussed herein before, one of the major components of environmental destruction and creation of greenhouse gasses has been private vehicles and their use for traveling to and from the workplace. In other words, to get to our jobs—and this seems even more damaging when they are producing harmful or not necessary products or services—we are killing the planet. We have to end this cycle.

Accordingly, this proposal to cut the workforce every year by 75%, means that we would each be working much less. And although the economists will have to weigh in with their analyses as to whether we can cut 60% or 80% of the work being done, nonetheless, it is expected at the end of the day, there will be substantial reductions in waged/salaried work outside of the house for each of us.

Now, obviously, this would have major ramifications across the whole of society—not just in the US but if adopted elsewhere, around the world—and there would be many things to work out. We would have to dramatically reduce consumption. This obviously would affect our family systems, our education systems, our health systems, etc., etc., and I'm going to save any comments on any of these “ancillary” aspects of society until another time.

The point being that if we only had to work one year out of every four, there would be time for a lot of different things to be done: even sleeping all day if we wanted! What I think would happen—after the shock of this major change wore off—is that people would get together on their own, and work to improve the lives and living situations of everyone in their neighborhoods, communities, towns and cities. We would have time to talk with neighbors, as well as help them raise barns. The pace of life would slow down immensely. Less pollution would be put into the air, whether by no longer producing shit, or by people simply not having to drive to work every day. There would be less competition, more cooperation. We'd have time to spend and interact with our children. We could take long trips on slower, but less emissions-producing transportation.

Now, key to all of this is that we would have to provide a livable income during those three years off: people would have to be able to afford to relax. That's why an automatic income for everyone in this country would be at least 200% of the poverty threshold. That way, 34.1 percent of the American people would immediately get substantial increases in their incomes.

At the same time, limits would have to be set on upper incomes. Maybe the top income for individuals—whether wages, salaries, any kind of income through investments, inheritances, etc.—would be set at \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year. Any income over that would be put into the collective “kitty” for the society to democratically decide how the money should be split up every year, as far as paying people their living wage, what investments need to be made, for research, sharing with other peoples around the world, etc.

Now, obviously, all of these changes—and especially limiting inheritances—might be instituted over time, so say within three generations every person would be down to the limits. That would give some time for adoption and adaptation.

Along with that would be dispersion of estates over time, with limits on how much land or what size house one could own; and no one could own two residences until everyone has one. Ideally, we’d get down to much smaller houses and estates even for the rich. And we’d encourage and limit size of houses and properties for everyone else as well, as well as encourage denser population areas, as well as concentrating people in smaller areas. We would then be able to reduce and eventually cut down on highway construction, urban/suburban dispersion, home construction, etc. Denser areas also can be served much more efficiently with mass transit instead of private vehicles. Of course, this would mean many, many fewer cars to be produced; those that were still to be produced would have their mileage requirements escalated, conversion to electric propulsion encouraged, and much less fossil fuels required—whose use would go down more and more over time to hopefully total replacement.

Obviously, we’d shift from fossil fuels to solar, wind, wave and other renewal and sustainable energy forms across the entire society. Quiet as it’s kept, we cannot meet today’s energy requirements through alternatives, which is another reason for conservation/reduction in all of its forms.

In plain language, living more simply would help others—humans, animals and most plants—simply live.

Yet as desirable as I think most people will find these ideas, there must be a deep-seated and honestly kept decision made as to the process: changes such as these must be democratically discussed and decided upon across our entire social order. It absolutely cannot be imposed upon the large majority of people. One thing known from an extensive reading of American history: people in our culture do not like being imposed upon, and will fight it tooth and nail. So that means that no matter how dire the situation gets beforehand, the government cannot impose these changes: people must agree on a high but possible threshold requiring consent—say 75 percent, not 50 percent plus 1—for adoption; people must be won over to these positions, with everyone able to express their opinion whether ratifying or rejecting these ideas.

But by treating everyone and their opinions with respect—or as much respect as they deserve (preferring not to hear rejecting racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic attitudes, but definitely rejecting accompanying *actions*)—we can win people over to a position supporting a plan such as this. The heart of this proposal is a drastic reduction in production, with the accompanying drastic reduction in work required outside of the household. These ideas would seem to be attainable in any case; if they might help

prevent the extinction of the human race, etc., I think they would be overwhelmingly embraced by most Americans and, importantly, most human beings across the planet. Obviously, much discussion needs to take place, and much tweaking of the proposal done, but I think this is something possible—and a realistic way forward.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that we are facing an environmental crisis that threatens the extinction of humans, animals and most plants by the turn of this (21st) century. The current economic situation in the United States was discussed. Recognizing this complex situation—environmental crisis joined with a drastically worsening economic situation—it has been recognized that we must provide for the well-being of people in our country in our efforts to address the situation in a realistic, albeit “out of the box” program. While focusing immediately on the situation in the US, the implications of this paper apply to people across the planet.

To do so, a program has been advanced that centers around the drastic reduction of production, along with a drastic reduction in the need for each person to work, with each person receiving a governmental subsidy to allow them to live a sustainable, yet simple life, during the years in which they do not work.

It is believed this program surpasses any other intended to address these interrelated problems. While not expecting this to be adopted in whole, it is advanced in the spirit of seeking to stimulate further critical thinking about how to address these issues.

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- 1 With all science being done based on contemporary analysis, the caveat is that things could possibly change with future, unknown and unforeseen advances and developments, and this claim may not be proven correct over time. We have no indication today that this will or will not happen. However, this claim is based on what we know now, and there is nothing on the horizon that can convincingly show that this will not take place. Accordingly, until something develops, we must go on what scientists know today or what they can extrapolate from data gathered up to present time. For one explicit analysis by a highly regarded climate scientist, see Mann, 2014.
 - 2 In addition to that published in books, more recent articles about the current environmental situation (from both popular sources and scientific journals) include Brasher, 2016; Editor, 2017; Fountain and Schwartz, 2016; Gerten, Rockstrom, Heinke, Steffen, Richardson, and Cornell, 2015; Gillis, 2017; Goode, 2017; Goodell, 2015, 2017; Immerwahr, 2015; Jamail, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Jaramillo and Destouni, 2015; Knight, 2016; McCauley, 2016; Melton, 2016a, 2016b; Rintoul, Silvano, Pena-Molino, Van Wijk, Rosenberg, Greenbaum and Blankenship, 2016; Samenow, 2017; and Steffen, et. al., 2015.
 - 3 These processes are not necessarily separate—especially in the case of the US and many of the other developed countries—but are delineated to help focus attention on all aspects of the problem; the issue of imperialism, for example, is rarely mentioned in environmental analyses, and this author believes it essential to not only include in analyses, but to draw attention to it. For arguably the best contemporary analysis of imperialism, see Scipes, 2016a: 31-36, based on the work of Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 1989.
 - 4 What passes for “solutions” is often a set of values that are desirable; Angus (2016) argues the need for ecosocialism, human solidarity, and movements to get us there. These are all fine values, and all of them are accepted by this researcher, but they are not a specific program and, therefore, while necessary, they are not sufficient (see Scipes, 2016c). In this paper, this researcher tries to surpass this, and advances a specific program.

After writing the above, I read Stan Cox’s (2016) article, arguing for a World War II-style mobilization to save the planet. In it, he alerted readers to The Climate Mobilization’s “Victory Plan,” written by Ezra Silk (2016), a well-thought out and extensive argument to substantively address these issues. However, while much more detailed than suggested herein, a quick look at the Table of Contents suggests that he ignores the social reality of many Americans which, I argue, must be addressed in any comprehensive program.
 - 5 Steffen, et. al., updated the initial research on planetary boundaries (PBs) in February 2015. In the structured abstract, they report that “two of the planetary boundaries—climate change and biosphere integrity—are recognized as core PBs based on their fundamental importance for the ES [Earth System]. The climate change is a manifestation of the amount, distribution, and net balance of energy at Earth’s surface; the biosphere regulates material and energy flows in the ES and increases its resilience to abrupt and gradual change. Anthropogenic perturbation levels of four of the ES processes (climate change, biosphere integrity, biogeochemical flows, and land-system change) exceed the proposed PB.... (Steffen, et. al., 2016). Note that “biosphere integrity” was not one of the initial nine planetary boundaries.
 - 6 Few environmentalists appreciate this issue, and rarely confront the complexity of saving the environment while taking care of people.
 - 7 That’s considered 100% of the poverty level, with everyone below that said to be “in poverty.” HHS calculates poverty thresholds for various sizes of families, but when reporting one number, it’s generally for a family of four.