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Green Capitalism Rears Its Head at Global Climate Action Summit



Police and protesters outside Climate Summit in San Francisco. Photo: Jonah Raskin.

Have no fear. The end is not near or here. Victory is ours, earthlings. Or so the website for the Global Climate Action Summit declared, though not in those exact words at the end of a week-long series of panels, talks, interviews and informal conversations that brought together, under the same roof, dozens of official delegates and hundreds of observers from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. The actual text for the Summit's website reads,

“The tide has turned in the race against climate change.” That was news to me, especially after listening to big name speakers, hour after hour, day after day on September 13 and 14 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Indeed, the Summit organizers and promoters had jumped the gun.

Full disclosure: I was stoned at the Summit; that might have affected my mood and my perspective, too. Before I arrived at the Moscone Center on Third Street in San Francisco I enjoyed an edible from the Garden Society, a company that manufactures cannabis products. The instructions on the package advised that it might take up to two-hours to have an effect, but the cannabis-laced chocolate that I ate kicked in in less than thirty minutes and lasted five hours.

Having altered my own inner climate, which was far easier to do than reverse global climate change, I was cool enough, calm enough and collected enough to enjoy the likes of actor Alec Baldwin, chimpanzee champion, Jane Goodall, N.Y. Mayor Bill de Blasio, former U.S. Senator John Kerry who helped negotiate the Paris Accords. A woman who lived North of the Arctic Circle explained to me that she and the tribes in the land of snow and cold and endangered Polar Bears had “a right to ice,” which was threatened by global warming.

If the tribes above the Arctic Circle had a right to ice, I figured I had a right to be high at the Global Climate Action Summit, and to do my best to channel Dr. Hunter S. Thompson who no doubt would have skewered the event in much the same way that he skewered the Kentucky Derby and the Republican and Democratic conventions that he attended for years.

The appeal of pot was that it made problems like global warming, seem to go away. It was the appeal of all those drugs that Hunter D. Thompson took, though they couldn’t take away his depression or stop him from committing suicide.

It helped that I had a press pass to the event, which was sponsored by the Bank of America, Kaiser Permanente, Google, Facebook and Amazon. When I arrived on Thursday September 13, there were hundreds of demonstrators in the streets, and hundreds of police officers, too. As the woman who issued me my credentials said, “It’s organized chaos this morning.” On Friday cops and protesters were gone, except for bearded, elf-like Bill Callahan from San Rafael who held a sign that said, “Our Greatest Threat is Us,” and who told me, “We don’t have enough respect for our planet. We need to protect it and to live responsibly.”

A friend in the city who had offered me a bed for the week, told me as I was leaving his house to go to the Moscone Center, “This whole event is about green capitalism.” I

thought about his comment on the N-Judah street car and on the line waiting to get inside the Moscone Center. “Is this event about green capitalism?” I asked Shashi Menon, the CEO of a corporation in Iowa that’s developing biofuels. Menon gave me an unambiguous answer. “Yes, it is,” he said. “We’ll have a better chance to survive catastrophic climate change with green capitalism than with the other kind.”

I didn’t hear anyone inside the Moscone Center mention the words “socialism” or “communism” though a member of the Central Committee of the Revolutionary Communist Party, who was protesting in the street on Wednesday, handed me a brochure entitled “How We Can Really Make Revolution” in which I read “The system of capitalism-imperialism cannot be reformed.”

No one inside the Moscone Center wanted a revolution of the sort that the Revolutionary Communist Party had in mind. What sane person would? Communism, Russia style, had been a disaster for the environment and for human beings, too. What delegates and participants wanted most of all was to survive the kind of storms that were battering the Philippines and that would soon batter the Eastern Seaboard of the United States.

Former Vice President Al Gore, who spoke like a man on fire, explained to the audience that, “we are in the early stage of the sustainability revolution which will be as profound as the industrial and the digital revolutions of the past.” Gore lashed out at “heat stress,” “rain bombs and “mud slides,” and lamented the fact that there were “millions of climate refugees” around the world. If there was a new president in Washington D.C., the U.S. would rejoin the Paris accords, Gore predicted. “We have the political will,” he said. “And that’s a renewal resource.”

Bill de Blasio said that New York was investing 2% of its pension assets in climate solutions. He added that it would take “trillions of dollars for decades to save us.” You didn’t have to listen that carefully to know that there would be no immediate solution to the problem, despite the official proclamation that claimed victory.

Jane Goodall has moved on from the chimps in Africa that provided her with a community for decades. Now, she travels around the world and talks about the need to save forests that are destroyed every year by the timber industry, and to make way for agriculture, to grow more grains, feed more cattle and produce more beef.

“Don’t eat things that are bad for you and for the planet,” Goodall said. She had stopped being a carnivore, she explained, when she looked down at a piece of meat on the plate in front of her and saw, “pain, suffering and death.”

Goodall allowed that many people in the world “felt helpless,” but she asked the crowd that gave her a standing ovation to remember “the indomitable human spirit.”

The panel with mayors from four continents was a study in contrasts. Annie Hidalgo, from Paris, was the best dressed of the lot —her white high-heeled shoes stole the show—and her smile was infectious, too, though Zandile Gumede, the Mayor of Durban in South Africa looked stunning in the tradition garb for women in her society.

“Sixty percent of the people in Durban have no electricity,” Gumede said. “But we have the same vision that you have here in California.” Sayeed Khokon, the Mayor of Dhaka in Bangladesh—and the son of the former mayor—explained that jobs, housing and hygiene were much needed in his city.

“There are too many people in Dhaka,” he said. “They have to be moved to the countryside. If they do they get free housing.”

When I asked the French delegate who was seated next to me what she thought of the mayor of Paris she said, “It’s good to have women in positions of power.” When I asked the French journalist from L’Agence France-Presse if the French knew the name “Jerry Brown,” he said, “Non,” and added that almost all of them knew the name “Donald Trump.”

At the Global Climate Action Summit, Donald Trump was the boogiemán. Alec Baldwin was the court jester, Jerry Brown, the gray eminence and John Kerry his front man. Almost every speaker thanked Jerry Brown for making the Summit happen.

Paul Polman, the CEO at Unilever—one of the major global companies committed to sustainability—gave the packed house a real fright when he said, “We’re losing the battle against climate change.” But he added, “The cost of not acting is greater than the cost of acting.”

These were desperate times that demanded desperate measures. It was a sign of the times that Unilever and other corporations were alarmed by the specter of global climate change and wanted to take action before it was too late. The speakers at the Moscone sounded an alarm; the ordinary citizens who attended saw that they were not alone and that others shared the same beleaguered planet with them. It was a good start. We would have to see where it would go, and if the thousands of people who attended the event would translate words into action in their own countries and communities. “We’re already doing good things,” a woman from Quebec told me when I asked if she and her fellow delegates from Canada were going to mobilize citizens to stop global warming, the melting of the ice, the destruction of the forests and the rise of the oceans.

Near the end of the marathon Summit, the South African born singer and songwriter Dave Matthews came on stage with an acoustic guitar and said, “We have to bridge the gap between the people who have a voice and those who feel voiceless and who are desperate to act.” He added, “This is a very strange gig” and then sang two spirited songs, including Woody Guthrie’s hymn “This Land Is Your Land.” It felt good to be reminded that the corporations that had poisoned the land with chemicals and that now were engaged in “green washing” did not own the U.S.A.

Before he walked off stage, Matthews told the audience that he and Jane Goodall were then and there “going to drink Scotch.” Hunter S. Thompson would have joined them. If they had invited me I would not have had to think twice before accepting the offer. But I was okay. I was still stoned. I was also ready to join Jane Goodall, become a vegetarian and do what I could do to restore our deforested planet. No, I wasn’t a revolutionary. I was merely a restorationist and proud to be one.