

Carbon Offsetting and the Commodification of Guilt

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It's clear that carbon offsetting can theoretically reduce carbon dioxide emissions. But the list of problems — even technical problems — with carbon offsetting is long, and the history of carbon offset projects is, at least as I understand it, beset with failures, in fact quite tragic. As I understand it, the relationship between planting trees and absorbing carbon dioxide is complicated and doesn't even always give a positive correlation; monoculture plantation forests are beset with problems; indigenous populations may oppose or suffer from the nearby neocolonial corporate project according to the well-known pattern. Other carbon offset projects have their own problems. Most suffer massive uncertainties in the calculation of absorbed carbon. The timescale of carbon absorption may be long, beyond the urgent need for atmospheric carbon dioxide reduction.

Then there's the problem — as all point out — that it does nothing to reduce emissions at their source. Doesn't even create an incentive to reduce emissions — the incentive is moral, that your conscience will be appeased after buying an indulgence. One may also use that conscience to reduce emissions through lower consumption or whatever — or, feeling complacent and relaxed and comfortable, do nothing or even consume more. Either seems plausible.

What bothers me most about carbon offsetting, though, is the emotional aspect: it is another example of the commodification of guilt and absolution. Here I'm referring to the case of the individual consumer; which seems quite different from the considerations attending corporate involvement. Clearly the whole thing can be done without any emotional attachment, simply as a rational transaction, but seems there is usually an emotional involvement in the transaction. In this sense it's just like child sponsorship: feel bad about third world poverty? Pay some money and see one child eat a little bit more. Just like fair trade coffee: feel bad about coffee plantation human rights abuses? Pay a few more cents and pretend that the exploitation isn't there because it has been faintly mitigated. Just like all the emotional manipulation in food packaging and advertising that seeks to convince us — at the psychological level, usually without evidence, by image and association — that it has been produced under humane, equitable, non-exploitative conditions, occasionally truthfully, usually deceptively.

All of these schemes may mitigate the problem to a minimal extent. All of them may be a more responsible expenditure of money than most alternatives. Any of them might, in fact, be the most practicable socially beneficial choice many of us have available. They might all be perfectly reasonable, worthwhile, noble projects. They are quite possibly the best, easiest to achieve, immediate projects that can be undertaken in the present circumstances — but that doesn't mean that we should ignore their flaws. All of them capitalise on the guilt of rich westerners. None of them addresses the underlying cause of the problem. None of them offers the least prospect of solving it.

All of these schemes are consumerist and materialist. We gain absolution by *paying money*, not addressing the problem ourselves, not partaking in the solution, not being active, not connecting with others, not changing social norms, not changing society. In fact they encourage passivity: pay the money, let the designated corporation take care of the problem, and hope for the best. It may be better than the shrug of futility — the usual philosophical accompaniment to consumerism, useful for obedience, order, social control, and minimising the threat of social change — but not by much.

By virtue of being market-based solutions, they undermine non-market efforts to address the problem. They reinforce the idea that we don't have to do anything; the market will solve the problem. Unfortunately the shifts in demand are so minimal, and so manipulated, that the idea of them precipitating the enormous structural changes required for the transition to a sustainable economy is preposterous. And a capitalist economy is committed to overconsumption and maximal growth as a matter of institutional necessity — which is rational only on the assumption that the planet is infinite in extent. However, enormous transitions are not impossible, even in a capitalist economy, with social investment and action — one only needs to recall, for instance, the massive state investment in developing new technologies such as nuclear weapons or space travel, or how a capitalist economy can perform a virtually immediate structural about-face in time of war. One just needs the political will; the contemporary state has been so captured by corporate interests, however, that we find the idea outlandish.

As it turns out, conscience is not something you can buy or sell — doing either negates it completely. Equity, freedom, and fulfillment have no monetary value. The very thought that one can discharge one's social responsibilities and make one's life more meaningful by paying money to a corporation in a market — regardless of its intentions — is deeply troubling. That we often do not find it so, says something about the society and culture in which we live. The commodity of absolution seduces us, and we obligingly succumb.

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As to the science and the technicalities, I can't and won't say much.

On the facts of global warming, there is no dispute. We may have minor differences as to the relative potentials of different approaches to the problem, but they are not particularly important. Some may see difficulties and incompleteness in any market-based approach, and point to historical examples of publicly-directed shifts in the economy; some may wish to stick to the most

immediate possibilities in the here and now. But in terms of what different approaches do what, these are scientific questions open to research and inquiry; many have been investigated thoroughly and among those apprised of the facts there seems little dispute. I am no expert however, and don't pretend to be one.

Carbon offset projects seem to have had some difficulties in practice, historically. These however don't seem unavoidable; they seem probably surmountable, with enough effort. I am certainly not apprised of the facts, but it seems that more recent examples have fewer problems — though they are not without their own issues. Again the problems don't seem impossible, and it seems that solutions will probably be found — the results of these projects being helpful for ameliorating global warming.

Carbon offsetting may mitigate the problem. It may be a more responsible approach than most alternatives. It might be the best, most achievable and most immediate approach that can be undertaken in present circumstances. I don't know if that's true — I'm no expert, hence 'may'! But I certainly hope it can achieve great reductions in greenhouse gas levels. All agree that it works within the system, so cannot change the system itself, and is at most a partial solution — but all hope that it does achieve its goals.

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But now let us move from the scientific realm of atmospheric physics and climatology to the realm of philosophy and psychology: political economy, marketing, consumerism, cultural theory. This means that it's no longer really a scientific discussion, but a philosophical and political one. This also means that I can make sweeping assertions without substantiating them. This makes it easier for a non-expert in technical matters! But I turn to this side of affairs not just because that's all I can say, or because it is easy to make such sweeping assertions, or because I want to offend people — none of these is true.

Rather, I think it's important to understand something about how society works. The social context defines the approaches we take, defines the questions we ask, defines what we think or don't think about, defines what is acceptable or not acceptable — it includes prevailing social norms, cultural expectations, and underlying assumptions. We must at least try to understand these things; and particularly as many of them seem deeply inhumane, we must question things from the foundations.

Carbon offsetting can well be seen as a sort of commodification of guilt. It's a thoroughly consumerist phenomenon; it's a 'throwaway' solution letting someone else take care of the problem; it doesn't involve direct participation in the solution; and reduces it to a market transaction, with consequent alienation, passivity and apathy. By reinforcing a market mindset, it makes non-market solutions less thinkable; they are much more practicable than we think, in my view. It involves capitalising on our emotions and guilt about western lifestyles. As far as I know, George Monbiot is the leading popular proponent of this point of view.

This is nothing more than a fairly standard left-wing critique of the market, applied to this particular case. (There are other critiques and analyses possible, to be sure.) It has nothing to say about what we should do in response. It's

just an attempt to understand the failings of a capitalist economy, in the present context. The point is that we should be armed with such an understanding when we try to decide what to do. We may well accept all this and still decide carbon offsetting is the best response — as I understand the situation, I think it's probably part of the best response, in some form, despite the vehemence in the criticism. There is no contradiction. We just don't have to like some aspects of the system we're working in, we might have a better assessment of where it fits into the big picture, and maybe we might try to change it if we can.

It is certainly true, in its favour, that carbon offsetting raises the profile of sustainability issues. Carbon offsetting can raise the profile of sustainability issues simultaneously as it engenders and reinforces alienation, apathy and reliance on the market. There is no contradiction; they are countervailing tendencies. Maybe raising the profile of the issues then results in popular pressure, changes the prevailing culture, and helps to overcome the tendencies to market reliance and inaction. I certainly hope so.

This argument may seem to have more to do with the marketing of carbon offset products, than about the carbon offset projects themselves. That is true. It's not just marketing though — it has to do with the entire system in which the industry operates and interacts with consumers, the prevailing culture and norms among those consumers, the general social context. Of course any discussion of this sort of thing is necessarily imprecise. And it is also very general. Carbon offsetting may be likened to recycling as another consumer-friendly approach to improving the environment — and when recycling involves monetary transactions, much of the same criticisms apply. (Not all of them, I think: if you still have to take your cans to the recycling station to get your refund, you are at least participating in the solution. Not so with paying money towards some faraway project.) Also with hybrid cars, buying organic, and so on. Similar analyses can apply to all of these, though the issues are different in each case. I have no idea if any is better or worse than any other; and suspect they are not really comparable. None of them is bad; all of them are probably part of a solution, perhaps part of a best solution. They are not ineffectual. But sadly, human affairs being as complicated as they are, there will probably never be a proposal that is unambiguously and unanimously regarded as perfect.

There are likely to be differences in the motivations of individuals and corporations engaging in carbon offsetting. Offsetting-as-guilt-commodification applies more to the individual consumer than corporate entities. The corporation is not a real human being, and is not a moral agent. The people within it may have noble intentions, may feel guilty, may want to improve their green credentials for marketing purposes, may be acting out of narrow self-interest, enlightened self-interest, institutional realpolitik or high-minded altruism. The corporation, in the end, or when the going gets tough, will of course throw all considerations other than profitability out the window. Corporations, being larger entities, may be much closer to the offsetting projects they sponsor than individuals, who necessarily have less ability to monitor such faraway projects to which they contribute proportionately less. Individuals are more alienated and less powerful. Individuals don't have the marketing or profitability pres-

tures of corporations, don't need to engage in greenwash — they are more likely to be motivated by purely moral considerations. And they will most likely feel better about themselves, having paid money to offsetting projects. It is in this sense that offsetting is absolution — if you want, like going to confession. (No need to confess your particular sins, however! “Dear father, I bought an energy-inefficient refrigerator and turned my air conditioner on when it wasn't really that hot.”) Medieval bishops would allow you to feel better about your sins by paying money. Fair-trade coffee allows you to feel better about third-world exploitation by paying money. Carbon offsetting allows you to feel better about your carbon footprint by paying money. Obviously there are differences in the reasons why you feel bad — religious sin is more specific and, at least in the sinner's mind, immoral; having a large carbon footprint is much more faraway, indistinct and of less clear immorality. But I think something like this must be an obvious part of the psychology of all such transactions. It can be viewed as absolution. As other things as well, but insight can be gained from this perspective, I think.

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Now, what I have called guilt here, one might also call noble altruism. And these are different emotions! And of course we all very much admire noble altruism! And personally at least, my philosophy is very much against ethics based primarily on sin, guilt and absolution. I could have said ‘commodification of altruism’ rather than ‘commodification of guilt’ — it may seem like I am denigrating altruism when it is put into practice, calling it guilt and calling it commodified. But that is not my intention at all — calling it ‘commodification of guilt’ seems to convey (at least to myself!) what I mean better. When altruism is commodified it may well become like guilt anyway.

To clarify, let us take a detour into ethics.

There are some conservative capitalist types who argue that altruism doesn't exist, that all altruism is really a response to guilt, and that doing something apparently benefiting others is actually selfish, done to appease one's guilt. In calling carbon offsetting a commodification of guilt it may seem I have subtly been applying this reasoning. Very much not! I think this argument is meaningless; and to the extent it's meaningful I think it's wrong. It's meaningless because it's basically a matter of definition. And to the extent it's not a matter of definition, to say that all conscientious action is performed on pain of guilt is misleading and contradicts experience. We do things for others not because we are thinking narcissistically of how good or bad we will feel otherwise, but we just think it's the right thing to do — it's what our conscience says. The thought process is not that convoluted. Other perspectives certainly exist, minds may differ, books can be written about it, but that's the gist of how I see it, a simple matter.

Now, one of the problems with an exclusive focus on sin, guilt and absolution is precisely that it forces self-examination to the exclusion of the outside world. Of course self-examination is useful and necessary, but we don't want to overdo it! When we take such a philosophy, and ask how we have done wrong, we make an accounting of our benefits and debits to others, and act based on our

self-assessment. It seems like a much better approach if one can orient oneself, philosophically and dispositionally, outwards — and then act according to what we see. We train ourselves to act according to the outside world, instinctively. One must live one's inner life outside oneself for life to be meaningful, I say. The relevant point here is: an ethics of sin and guilt and absolution is the natural accompaniment to an accounting approach to ethics.

So, when we come to the state of the world, and we come to our participation in it, we come to the carbon emissions generated as a result of our actions. And our conscience says recoils at the catastrophe of the present. It says — we have to do something about this! And our noble altruism looks for ways to help. There are many ways we might come up with, some more open than others, some easier than others. Some involve helping directly, whether planting trees or reducing consumption or other possibilities. Some involve taking up a career in the environmental field. And some involve paying money to carbon offset schemes.

Well, the first two options involve active participation, involvement, altruism — extremely noble, directed not at others in particular, but the whole world, not just humanity, not just the present generation. The third doesn't carry the same noble tinge, at least to my mind: no participation, alienation, monetary transaction, some faraway project, pay money, problem goes away, out of sight, don't have to think about it any more, that's it. As all point out, it's better than nothing, and it may well be accompanied by more searching analyses of the problem, and commitments to do more. But when we take this road, we now: calculate the amount of emissions; convert it to dollars; and pay it off. What did we pay off? It's not really the carbon emissions, if it's a voluntary transaction. It had something to do with social responsibility or conscience or altruism. But it doesn't sound right to say we paid off our altruism, or our responsibility, or conscience. These are not things you can pay off. On the other hand it makes sense, to me at least, to say we paid off our guilt. We had to account — we liquefied our altruism. It appears that the currency of altruism is guilt. Altruism is not a commodity, but guilt is. Guilt can be absolved, but altruism cannot be indulged — altruism is better than that. The commodification of altruism is guilt, in this sense — and hence the whole enterprise can be viewed as a commodification of guilt.

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A depressing critique of an industry that offers one of the best hopes for mitigating global warming? Perhaps. But there is no contradiction between consciousness of the flaws of a project and wholehearted participation in it — if it is judged to be the least bad alternative. It is often the case in contemporary human affairs that all the alternatives are bad — and we are forced to elect from the corrupt, choose from the useless, argue between different versions of certain disaster, and lurch interminably from one crisis to another. The blessed tranquility of life in the Elysian fields is not for our age, however much we yearn for it — and it is only achievable with struggle today.

Wherever they are, we will certainly not get there without scrupulous honesty, without rigorous examination of different alternatives, and without an

ability to offer advice and criticism where necessary — even to our friends and allies. But the critique here is political-economic, psychological, ethical and cultural, not technical; it is relatively marginal to the critical goal of mitigating global warming. These are our friends after all! But however marginal, it is not marginal to the system as a whole; and such a critique will continue relentlessly as long as selfish interests continue to drive economic affairs, as long as economic wealth and power is vested in private tyrannies, as long as productive capital is placed at the whim of private owners, as long as the bulk of the population must rent itself out on pain of starvation and humiliation, and as long as the global consequences of this state of affairs continue to rend the world.