

# Ecowars

*Soundings* 34 engages with some of the issues in current ecological politics. As Noel Castree points out, although there is a lot of environmental chatter in the media, the dominant voices tend to be those of the liberal environmentalists - solutions are seen in terms of markets, eco-taxes, consumer conscience and voluntary codes. As he also points out, these solutions have achieved very little. An environmental politics that offers no challenge to neoliberalism is unlikely to succeed in its aims.

Several people in this issue (see Mary Mellor in particular) point out that the environment is regarded as an 'externality' in neoclassical economics. In other words, in market calculations the environment simply doesn't figure. This is a prime example of the way markets in capitalism institutionalise a separation of the economy from all other aspects of life. This is now an issue about humanity's collective relationship to nature. The future of the planet is at stake, and the hidden hand of the market is not going to make the necessary connections for us here.

Consumerism also lies at the heart of this issue. Speaking on Radio 4's *Today* programme recently, Julian Little of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (a group which represents GM firms) stated that the first round of the GM battle had been lost partly because its advocates failed to appeal to consumers (for more on GM see Anthony Jackson and Nigel Mullan). The second round in the battle for GM is to be based more on goods which will appeal to the consumer (such as slimming foods - solve the obesity epidemic with GM foods). Little felt that this would bring the consumer on board. He may well be right in this. In the individual consumption of commodities connections are easily hidden or forgotten. One of the aims of the ecological movement is to remind people about those connections - where their waste goes, where their oil has come from, how the chicken in their vindaloo was produced (see Colin Campbell on oil, Peter

Singer and Jim Mason on factory farming).

Over-consumption in the West is powered by unequal global trade (see Juliet Schor). Cheap fashion in Primark brings huge external costs for the environment as well as exploitative working conditions for garment-makers. As Juliet Schor argues, we need a politics that addresses consumerism as an ideology, and focuses on sustainable consumption. In *Soundings* 31 Kate Soper argued for the need for a 'republican' dimension to consumption, a way of making a collective politics among consumers. The link between individual ethics and the politics of consumption is in need of further exploration. In the recent Compass book *The Good Life*, the argument is made that people need to be able to make ethical consumer decisions as part of a wider group - that the role of politics here is to enable people to feel that their individual consumer choice is one that they are also making socially, the collective strength of many choices being stronger than the individual choice of one person.

**I**n other words the two biggest obstacles to sustainability are companies that continue to pursue profit oblivious to their impact on the earth, and people for whom individual consumer choices ultimately also do not link into the bigger picture. If we don't take on these key features of capitalism we are not going to be able to effect the kind of economic and lifestyle changes that will be necessary to address climate change. The ecowars of the future will become a fight over dwindling resources and inhabitable places.

Anyone who thinks voluntary codes and ethics will be enough to control multinational companies and their allies in government should read the articles in this issue on DR Congo and East Timor. These are both accounts of the complex ways in which the West intervenes to secure its interests in less powerful countries. In public they draw on the commonsense of the need to intervene in chaotic situations, while in private they stoke the conflicts and back those who will ensure the flow of goods from poor to rich. As Bilkis Malek argues in her compelling analysis of dominant attitudes towards British Muslims, instead of always challenging Muslims to take wider critical ownership for the defeat of Islamic extremism, there needs to be a collective taking of responsibility for the cultures and systems that produce the thinking and actions of those who act in the name of western civilisation.

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