
Book Review: The Green Salesman: reflections on the book and film, 'An inconvenient truth' by Albert Gore Jr.

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Biographical notes: Andrew Jamison is a Professor of Technology, Environment and Society at Aalborg University and the author, among others, of *The Steam-Powered Automobile. An Answer to Air Pollution* (Indiana University Press, 1970), *The Making of Green Knowledge. Environmental Politics and Cultural Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and co-author, with Mikael Hård, of *Hubris and Hybrids. A Cultural History of Technology and Science* (Routledge 2005).

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In a year in which Israel and its neighbours once again went to war, and the violence in Iraq reached new levels of horror, the excitement generated by Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* was a kind of light in the darkness.

After a never ending stream of scientific reports and even a Hollywood film, *The Day After Tomorrow* had failed to do the trick, Gore's film has managed to bring the issue of global warming to public attention. Mixing entertainment and earnestness, Gore has brought environmental concern into the cultural mainstream.

But what kind of environmental concern is it that Gore is promoting? And what does Al Gore, the life-long politician, mean when he says that global warming is not a political, but a moral issue?

In his own words, Gore has taken on the role of a salesman, and it can therefore be of some value to ask what it is that he is selling, and, in particular what sort of 'morality' he is selling. Indeed, it is important to question whether it is a good idea to stress the moral aspect of global warming rather than its intrinsic economic and political aspects. It was, after all, a rhetorical emphasis on 'moral values' that helped Bush get reelected in 2004.

Most obviously – and problematically – Gore is selling what might be called a morality of individual redemption. Like so much of the public discussion of global warming that has followed in the wake of his film, Gore is trying to convince us that we, as individuals, are somehow responsible for global warming: we have sinned, and like sinners in the past, we can only redeem ourselves through good deeds.

There is little attempt in his film, or in his book, to present any of the relevant contextual factors that have brought on the situation. Global warming is not explained as a more or less logical outcome of a particular way of making things, or of producing and consuming commodities, but as an 'inconvenient truth', something that disturbs the continuous and never problematised process of progress, based on the wonders of science and technology.

As in so much of the literature on global warming, there is very little explanation of any kind, in the film or in the book, about the reasons behind global warming. The backlash of the so-called skeptics has done its dirty work, distracting attention and public talk away from any meaningful social analysis of environmental problems, and instead making it necessary to 'prove' over and over that global warming can not (entirely) be attributed to natural causes. In a manner reminiscent of Bjørn Lomborg, Denmark's world-famous 'skeptical environmentalist' (Jamison, 2004), Gore tells his tragic tale with scientific-looking graphs and charts, and like Lomborg has been rightly criticised for taking many of his numbers out of context.

In Gore's film and book, there is no attempt to attribute responsibility to any specific social group or actor or institution or, heaven forbid, any particular company. There is no effort made to try to identify particular causes and particular social and economic activities that are more responsible than others.

And since nobody is really responsible, the 'solution' is similarly individualised. It is we, as individuals, who need to redeem ourselves and deal with our own individual contribution to global warming. We are urged to buy better light bulbs and household appliances, and make sure our computers are turned off when we leave the house, and maybe even consider driving our cars a bit less, but certainly buy green cars as soon as they hit the market. We have to become green consumers (non-consumption is here not an issue). Rather than organising some sort of meaningful political, or collective strategy, we are encouraged to deal with this enormous challenge – the biggest challenge that humanity has ever faced, according to the former vice president – as individual consumers.

The other side of Gore's morality is the attribution of political agency to the so-called market. The solution to global warming, in Gore's moral universe, is green products, or, more generally, green business. For a failed politician, it might make sense to give up on politics, but does it really make sense for the rest of us?

By now, there are many companies, and not least venture capitalists, who have begun to see that there are rather large profits to be made by selling such products as hybrid cars, wind energy plants, solar panels, green roofs, green building materials and more generally, 'sustainably' designed products. Like Gore, who is actively involved in some of these companies, the 'moral issue' is to profit from global warming. In fact, making money on global warming might even save 'us' from the Chinese and Indians who make everything else so much cheaper than 'we' do. If we are quick about it, we might be able to compete with them, at least in the making of green products.

The striking thing about Gore's film and book – and all of the endless commentary – is the total absence of any discussion about how we might change the way we make things, that is, our system of producing and consuming and innovating and selling. The economic system is simply not up for discussion and his 'moral universe' has to be seen against this background.

Al Gore, the green salesman, assures us that we need to keep on buying and shopping and making things we do not need, just as long as they are green.

It does not matter whether that actually is a reasonable way to deal with global warming or not.

Reference

Jamison, A. (2004) 'Learning from Lomborg: or where do anti-environmentalists come from?', *Science as Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp.173–195.