



The Authoritarian Implications of Greta Thunberg's Crusade against Markets

Reducing the sway of 'market economics' is a euphemism for expropriating control of resources from peaceful and productive producers.

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Nobel Peace Prize nominee and *Time Magazine's* 2019 "person the year" Greta Thunberg, who has spoken to world leaders at multiple United Nations Climate Summits, has been known as one of the world's most influential climate activists since her rise to global prominence in 2018.

She has received admiration and gratitude from such influential figures as Sir David Attenborough, Prince Harry, and former President of the United States Barack Obama, who Tweeted in 2019, "Just 16, @GretaThunberg is already one of our planet's greatest advocates. Recognizing that her generation will bear the brunt of climate change, she's unafraid to push for real action. She embodies our vision at the @ObamaFoundation: A future shaped by young leaders like her."

But despite the amplitude that government and media elites have lent to her voice, it is remarkable how infrequently they address her ultimately tyrannical political agenda, which she shares with much of the environmentalist movement—it's not just about solving climate change, as many who sing her praises would apparently like you to believe.

What Thunberg's Movement Wants

An influential subset of the environmentalist movement are not just interested in regulating the market and investing in green technology to avert climate disaster—they're out to eliminate the free market system altogether, for social as well as environmental reasons.

In Naomi Klein's 2014 *New York Times* bestseller *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, she constantly renounces free markets, writing that "free market ideology continues to suffocate the potential for climate action" and that "revolutionary levels of transformation to the market system [are] now our best hope of avoiding climate chaos." Klein argues that, "Just as the climate change deniers I met at the Heartland Institute fear, there is a direct relationship between breaking fossilized free market rules and making swift progress on climate change."

But she doesn't just want to transform the economy for environmental reasons. "I am convinced that climate change represents a historic opportunity on an even greater scale. As part of the project of getting our emissions down to the levels many scientists recommend, we once again have the chance to advance policies that dramatically improve lives, close the gap between rich and poor, create huge numbers of good jobs, and reinvigorate democracy from the ground up," she writes. And, "It can disperse power into the hands of the many rather than consolidating it in the hands of the few, and radically expand the commons, rather than auctioning it off in pieces."

In 2021, US Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez reintroduced her Green New Deal resolution in Congress (after having introduced it with Massachusetts Senator Edward J. Markey in 2019) which according to ocasio-cortez.house.gov “has inspired over a dozen pieces of legislation and 10 regional Green New Deals.”

The Green New Deal, which enjoys support from more than 40 members of Congress, aims to radically diminish or socialize free market activity by instituting a universal income and universal health care program, requiring every building in the United States to be fitted or retrofitted with new state-mandated energy systems, eliminating all fossil fuel use including gas and oil, and many other regulating or eliminating private enterprise in many other ways.

The deal would cost American taxpayers at least \$10 trillion according to the self-proclaimed socialist Ocasio-Cortez, but would likely not be achievable for any less than \$51 trillion to \$93 trillion according to an estimate by the American Action Forum.

These goals are in line with Ocasio-Cortez’s consistent repudiation of “capitalism,” which she called “not a redeemable system” in a *Yahoo Finance* interview and told an SXSW audience “cannot be redeemed,” each time making social as well as environmental arguments against capitalism.

In 2019, Thunberg wrote with two co-authors in Project Syndicate that, “After all, the climate crisis is not just about the environment. It is a crisis of human rights, of justice, and of political will. Colonial, racist, and patriarchal systems of oppression have created and fueled it. We need to dismantle them all.”

At the time, I wondered whether she would count free markets among the systems that require dismantlement, as much of the environmentalist movement does. But Thunberg’s forthcoming book, *The Climate Book: The Facts and the Solutions* (to be released this February), puts all mystery on the topic to rest. According to a passage she released on Twitter last month, “Leaving capitalist consumerism and market economics as the dominant stewards of the only known civilization in the universe will most likely seem, in retrospect, to have been a terrible idea.”

Justice and Property Rights

When Thunberg and others suggest the diminishment of markets, they are implicitly expressing preference for whatever alternative method of resource distribution would replace them. So let’s look at what such alternatives would necessarily consist of.

Any resource, in order to be useful, must first be cultivated by one or more individuals. A tin vein in the ground or an apple growing on a tree is of no value to anyone until energy and will have been exerted to make use of it.

Property is a name given to resources that have been cultivated. A tin deposit in an undiscovered region is not yet property—it’s just raw materials. But if someone comes upon and mines it, it becomes property—the produce of the miner.

Who controls each piece of property is among the central questions of politics. Does one king control everyone’s produce? Does each person control their own? Is it put to a vote?

This is the question that advocates of the free market system, as well as environmentalists who decry markets, are weighing in on. The economist Murray Rothbard, in his 1974 essay “Justice

and Property Rights: The Failure of Utilitarianism,” explains that “the free-market economy, as complex as the system appears to be on the surface, is yet nothing more than a vast network of voluntary and mutually agreed upon two-person or two party exchanges of property titles, such as we have seen occurs between wheat and cabbage farmers, or between the farmer and the teacher.”

When a free person produces a good to be traded or sold, having automatic initial control over that good by virtue of having produced it, he or she exists in a free market with respect to that good unless and until another individual or group takes control of that good against the will of the producer. And if the producer voluntarily relinquishes control of the good to someone else before or after producing it, for example in a trade or as an employee, the good still exists in a free-market paradigm unless and until an individual or group takes control of the good against the will of the new owner.

Therefore, any legislative prevention of free-market activity must necessarily entail the control of resources by someone against the will of whoever obtained the resources through production or voluntary exchange. And indeed, environmental public policy proposals by the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Naomi Klein, or anyone else almost always includes either regulation (coercive prevention of certain market activity) or taxation (coercive acquisition of control over resources against the will of their owners) as an integral part of the plan.

The Road from Markets to Tyranny

Like members of any intelligent species fit for survival, humans are almost always in pursuit of more wealth, because they never know how deep the next catastrophe to befall them and their loved ones will be; nor do they know how much better life could get if they only had more to invest in the future. In a free market, because people cannot acquire existing non-fraudulently obtained wealth against the will of its current owner(s), people must resort to creating wealth (for trade or direct consumption) through their labor and ingenuity in order to become wealthier.

To the degree that a society diverges from the free market paradigm—allowing people under certain circumstances to acquire the products of others’ labor against the will of the producer(s)—an incentive is created for some or all members of the society to divert a portion of their resources (time, capital, and so on) away from increasing their productivity and toward acquiring already existing wealth against the will of the current owners of that wealth. For example, this may take the form of lobbying, bribing, or otherwise pushing regulations or taxes that hurt one’s business competitors (or members of economic classes). In the most violent moments of human history, it has taken forms such as genocide and slavery.

These divergences from the free market paradigm, big or small, reduce your incentive to be productive because they create the opportunity to instead leech off of the productivity of others. They also reduce your incentive to be productive because they allow others to expropriate your produce against your will. These misalignments of incentives may seem minor in the context of a single life, but on the scale of global capital, they redirect untold fortunes toward corporate welfare, lobbying, and countless other zero-sum or negative-sum strategies for leeching off of the labor and productive ingenuity of others.

In a free market in which such leeching wasn’t tolerated, those untold fortunes would instead be most profitably funneled into producing valuable goods and services that others would want to

purchase voluntarily, which would raise the standard of living for virtually everyone in the market by increasing the abundance of products, jobs, and other opportunities for mutually beneficial market activity. This is why freer markets are almost always more conducive to economic growth than all other economic systems.

On the other end of the continuum, when markets have been completely eliminated and the distribution of all resources is determined by some force such as a vote or the whim of a bureaucracy or communist oligarchy rather than any amount of propertarian individualism, the incentive for a firm or individual to spend any resources on production is all but eliminated. When everything you produce is allocated by some political body, any moment, thought, or dollar of capital you spend on production is an act of self-sacrifice because you could be more profitably spending it trying to influence the political system, whether by voting for, bribing, or lobbying for the political candidate or legislation that is offering you the most political advantage over others in the zero-sum struggle for resources, rather than producing wealth over which you will have no more influence than anyone else.

This is one of the reasons why, whenever the market system has been done away with almost entirely, the result has been complete societal impoverishment and collapse.

Even if eliminating markets would solve humanity's environmental problems, the ensuing demolition of economic prosperity would probably not be worth it. But drastically diminishing the power of markets is not a solution to climate change anyway.

The environment is always changing, typically faster than any species can adapt, which is why roughly 99.9 percent of all species that have ever crawled or swam upon the earth have gone extinct. And humans, which were roughly at the poverty level of the rest of life on the planet for most of human history, would be no different without the wealth that markets facilitate.

That material progress, which has accelerated environmental change but even more so has accelerated humanity's biologically unprecedented ability to adapt, is why climate related deaths have steadily fallen from 255.3 per million in 1920 to only 1.9 per million in 2020—a trend that has not reversed even in recent years and shows no signs of reversing any time soon.

Greta Thunberg's movement is about much more than climate change—it is about tyrannically capturing control of resources against the will of those who peacefully and productively obtained them. If she gets her way and the influence of markets diminishes, the trend of humans increasing their ability to afford the infrastructure, technology, research, and other defenses against climate change will be among the first trends to diminish along with them.

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