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Commentary

Unsustainable Politics 2012

Paul Croce, Ph.D.

There were no ads during the presidential debates. This is the exception that proves the rule in modern America. Nascar drivers broadcast their endorsing companies across their outfits, and the rest of us more subtly wear logos of brand-name clothing.

Advertisers study us very closely to know just what we want; beneath our talk and even our thoughts, what will we pay for? In soccer, the eyes don't announce a player's next move, but the feet will. So to understand the political choices that were offered to us during the 2012 election season, don't just look to the party platforms, the political speeches, the debates, or even the political ads presented during the most richly funded campaigns in world history. Look to the ads for other products.

Many ads from the energy industry have been promoting the value of "clean coal" and "energy independence," and they promise to steer America clear of imported oil. Almost every one of these ads makes reference to the environment, with lots of pictures of beautiful landscapes; but they make little mention of what impact their products and services will have on the health of those landscapes. Every ad ends with some version of an average person (like you and me!) saying, "I'm an energy voter."

These ads are surrounded by others about smartphones, travel, and handy snacks that seem devoid of politics. But, in the words of the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella, "put them together and what have you got?" These consumer products need energy in abundant quantities, and the energy ads promise ways to get it cheaply. No matter our talk, no matter our political persuasions, these are the things that the vast majority of Americans want to buy in ever-increasing quantities.

The ads are bright and hopeful, but a funny thing has already started happening on the way to the bright future they promise. Their edifice of business growth and expanding consumption has enormous structural problems.

This future will feature long-term pressures on the environment from steadily increased development, habitat loss, release of toxins in landscapes and in our bodies, and depleted resources starting with food and fuel. The train of business-generated consumerism continues robustly, but with ever-fewer buffers in the natural world. The optimistic ads downplay these pessimistic disadvantages of our progress by simply ignoring them, or by promising to manage them with minimal risk. Their message: Don't worry, and you'll still get the goods.

The lack of explicit mention of candidates or parties in any consumer ad is an indication of their multipartisan appeal—not just to voters for the two major parties, but also to those too skeptical or too indifferent to vote. But of course, our purchase of the things presented in the ads is an enormous vote in itself, and more consequential than the voting in November.

You want to keep buying stuff? Despite all the preaching for conservation of resources and preservation of landscapes that is exactly what the vast majority of the American public wants. But in the long run that desire can only be fulfilled with a perspective that looks beyond the craving for immediate jobs to earn the paychecks that allow for consumer purchases in abundance. That hunger for consumption can only be fed with long-term economic and environmental health.

This message is readily available to any politician willing to call attention to our structural problems. Increased jobs from strained resources will eventually damage the very goose that can produce precisely the golden employment picture we all want. Even with high unemployment, countless jobs go unfilled because of unqualified applicants, so better to devote resources for training people for shifting jobs, especially jobs in sustainable industries. We can use taxes not only for debt reduction and encouragement of investments that foster job creation rather than speculation, but also use the tax structure to penalize investments that send jobs overseas or that

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actively destroy resources. We can even have fewer taxes on income (which we want to encourage) and more on consumption (which in excess can be destructive), and we can layer the tax system to prevent regressive burdens on low-income citizens.

Let's encourage the politicians who can expose government subsidies without public purpose or long-term social uplift. Let's support politicians who can support incentives to promote long-term economic strength. With those political directions, Americans can build a healthy economy to last. Without this kind of sustainable politics, to paraphrase a recent set of campaign ads, we can't build that.

On November 6, almost half of American voters cast their ballot for a presidential candidate who ridiculed attempts to "slow the rise of the oceans" and efforts to "heal the planet." Republican candidate Mitt Romney held these goals up as impossibly frivolous compared to his promise, presented directly to the average American citizen, to "help you and your family" with more jobs and lower prices.

A slim majority of Americans voted to reelect a president who has had shifting seasons of attention to environmental problems; ClimateSilence.org presents a graph of the candidates' approaches to climate change, using a scale from Actions and Promises to Avoidance and Denial (<http://climatesilence.org/graph/>).

Despite President Barack Obama's relative silence on environmental issues during the campaign, after the election, he did show explicit concern about environmental destruction in his victory speech; if a politician includes such a topic among five items worth mentioning at this crucial moment of declaring victory and setting direction for his second term, there is some reason for hope.

Until now, our unsustainable politics has been bringing us to an environmental cliff that might make even the dreaded fiscal cliff look mild. Whether the impulse for sustainability comes primarily from environmentalist Democrats or from Republicans eager to support a healthy economy, we cannot just keep growing without some intention to grow in smarter ways. Doctors, of course, have a name for such unchecked growth: cancer.

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