What are we to make of green activists who oppose electricity and want most of humanity to remain poor?

What are we to make of green activists who would rather see Zambia face starvation than let people eat genetically-modified crops?

What are we to make of green activists who promote "voluntary human extinction"?

Finally, what are we to make of a philosopher who once held libertarian, pro-capitalist views, later held anti-capitalist and anti-globalization views, and has finally denounced humanity as a plague upon the Earth, openly longing for our destruction as the only solution to environmental problems?

Calling them all evil might be oversimplifying. A friend of mine, Critical Review editor Jeffrey Friedman, insists that there are no evil people. He points out that political activists love to paint their opponents as evil but that usually their opponents just sincerely disagree about how to make the world a better place. No one, the argument goes, does what he does because he woke up in the morning thinking, "How can I make the world, on balance, a worse place?"

I think Friedman is wrong to say no one thinks this way, since there are at least a few bullies, sadistic murderers, violent Satanists, and gang members eager to prove how bad they are. These people are evil in the classic sense of the word. But the case of well-meaning political zealots is a more interesting one. If someone genuinely believes that blowing up an airplane will, in the long run, make the world a better place, might we say that person despite making a terrible, disastrous error in judgment (and deserving whatever retaliation he gets) is not evil?

Perhaps, but we are within our rights to inquire further about what "a better world" means in such a person’s mind and whether he has been morally responsible in thinking that vision through. If his goal is a world of peace, happiness, and prosperity for all, we might be willing to concede he is not evil in the classic, villainous sense of the term though we'll still happily shoot him (and so would Friedman, I should note ultimately we both care more about consequences than intentions). If, on the other hand, the zealot’s vision of "a better world" is one in which, to paraphrase Osama bin Laden, "the world runs red with the blood of infidels," it is fair to ask whether this in any meaningful way constitutes "good intentions" though the zealot's desire to secure salvation and eternal joy for all the non-infidels means that even butchery may be an attempt (albeit a failed one) to do good.

However, it would be naive to think that classically evil motives never intermingle with people's stated good intentions. The zealot may have become a zealot in the first place in part because he loves to kill. Someone might embrace the anti-moral philosophy of Nietzsche in large part because he's eager to rationalize shoplifting and vandalism, hobbies he loved long before reading Beyond Good and Evil. Similarly, a Marxist acquaintance of mine and other left-wing activists recently
had a rumble with neo-Nazis in Washington, D.C. (think of it as a re-enactment of Weimar political violence) and while my friend went mostly out of a sincere desire to oppose fascism, surely he went in part because he enjoys a good fistfight. So "good intentions" can be a veneer over nasty, misanthropic, sadistic motives.

And that brings us back to the various green activists I mentioned at the beginning.

When an activist such as Gar Smith, webzine editor for the Earth Island Institute (the group that worked to save the "Free Willy" whale), says "There is a lot of quality to be had in poverty" and complains that electricity is "destroying" primitive cultures by bringing them media and machines and raising their standard of living, should we regard him as well-meaning? According to a report by CNSNews.com, Smith says, "I don't think a lot of electricity is a good thing. It is the fuel that powers a lot of multi-national imagery."

When the president of Zambia says his nation would "rather starve" than accept genetically-modified crops and imminent famine creates the possibility that Zambia may one day face that very choice should we view the anti-biotech activists who created this situation as compassionate people? Should we listen with sympathy to the hecklers who interrupted Colin Powell at the Johannesburg Earth Summit when he defended Zimbabwean property rights and American biotech? U.S. AID Administrator Andrew Natsios, according to the Washington Times, is one man who is no longer willing to give the anti-biotech activists the benefit of the doubt. He now openly criticizes them as obstacles to famine relief. Leftists may soon be forced to decide which they hate more, famine or technology, and the answer will speak volumes about whether their vaunted compassion is really misanthropy in disguise. (One precedent that makes optimism difficult is environmentalists' support for the ban on DDT, a ban that has cost millions of lives.)

When the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement calls for all humans to stop breeding so that humanity vanishes from the Earth for the sake of Gaia they at least do so with some humor, but is it unreasonable to think that there may be some good, old-fashioned misanthropy (with which any intelligent person can sympathize) underlying their ostensible concern for trees and ecosystems? In the grand scheme of things, if even a species as impressive as humanity doesn't matter, what ultimately makes trees and ecosystems so important?

Is it possible that many of these green activists are simply growing weary of decades of disguising a deep hatred of their fellow humans as a deep concern for nature?

Philosopher John Gray was once more-or-less libertarian but is now the civilization-despising author of Straw Dogs, in which he argues that humanity is inherently destructive and predatory and that we should hope the "plague" of humans will eventually vanish from the Earth, enabling it to recover from its metaphorical illness. Helene Guldberg, in her Spiked-Online review of the book, notes that Gray laments the introduction of agriculture some 10,000 years ago as an attack on nature, while Guldberg counters that we should "celebrate the birth of agriculture...for marking the start of human civilization." In adopting his anti-agro view, Gray, previously a hardcore conservative (at least for a few years after his more libertarian phase) has reached a reactionary reductio ad absurdum: He has come to hate modern society so much that he joins the environmentalist radicals of Earth First! in longing to go "back to the Pleistocene!" (There are times
when one suspects that all the world's fanatical causes are basically interchangeable, as when the Palestinian spokesman at the Earth Summit used all of his time to condemn Israel instead of touting environmentalism.)

We live in strange times when a conservative is echoing radical environmentalists, while Guldberg, part of the Marxist crowd associated with Spiked-Online and the Institute of Ideas, sticks up for Western civilization, industry, and science (actually, Marx himself, who admired progress and condemned the "idiocy" of rural life, probably would have approved, but nowadays Guldberg and company's sentiments make them unusual on the left). The Australian philosopher Chandran Kukathas suggested a decade ago, when Gray first began toying with extreme conservative and environmentalist views, that Gray should be labeled "blue-green" (in keeping with the European practice of calling leftists red, conservatives blue, and environmentalists green). Brian Micklethwait argues on Samizdata.net that Gray is just a grouchy pessimist and always has been.

And people should be allowed to be grouchy pessimists, even grouchy misanthropes who wish humanity would vanish. But if those are the sorts of motives that underlie their manifestos against biotech corn and their protests against multinational agriculture companies, we probably shouldn't delude ourselves into thinking they have the public good in mind when they make policy recommendations. It may be time to stop philosophizing with the greens and start psychoanalyzing them in much the same way that we do other hate groups.
Hello.  
I read your essay on CCNet.  
I have one suggestion, which is to avoid using the terms "good and evil" in discussions of world affairs.  
The problem of whether political, religious, or environmental zealots fall into the one category or the