

Notes & Briefs

Green Collars, Plastic Bags, MySpace Gangsters, etc.

Neologism watch: The term “green-collar jobs” has been much on the lips of this year’s Democratic presidential candidates. The term generally refers to positions in the clean energy and clean-tech sectors. While the term is obviously intended to suggest that these are new environmentally-friendly jobs that don’t fit in the old categories of blue- and white-collar work, most so-called green-collar jobs actually *are* just white- and blue-collar positions with companies producing alternative energy or energy-efficient products and services.

The term debuted as early as 1999 when Alan Thein Durning, founder of the Sightline Institute, a regional environmental group, introduced it in his 1999 book *Green Collar Jobs: Working in the New Northwest*. The book addressed how the tech boom in the Pacific Northwest resulted in an economic development that was gentler on the environment. Professor Raquel Pinderhughes of San Francisco State University also claims to have coined the term; she used it starting in 2004 to describe “manual labor jobs related to improvements in environmental quality.”

Democratic presidential candidates have picked up the concept of green-collar jobs as a way to do several things at once: to counter disappearing jobs in the manufacturing sector, build an alliance with unions, and make the

case for greater investments in alternative energy production. The thinking goes like this: Creating domestic alternative-energy projects and retrofitting existing buildings with energy-efficient technology will pave the way for new local labor opportunities that cannot be outsourced to other countries.

But what jobs fit in the green-collar category—or the related category of “clean-tech” jobs? The standards and definitions for these positions are extremely tricky, as one commentator recently pointed out: “Most analysts would consider jobs in a recycling plant to be environmental jobs. But what if the recycling plant itself produces air pollution? What about a firm in North Carolina that produces emissions control equipment for power plants in Alabama? It seems clear that the jobs in the North Carolina company should be considered green or environmental jobs, even though the user of the equipment in Alabama may cause pollution in North Carolina. What about environmental engineers and environmental controls specialists working in a coal-fired power plant? What about the workers who produce environmental control equipment for the plant?”

As the economy evolves to include more companies that produce alternative-energy and clean-tech products, more jobs will be created. Many will be skilled positions, while plenty of jobs in supporting industries

will also benefit. The Democratic presidential candidates' talk of so-called green-collar jobs is, it seems, mostly a gimmick used to burnish green credentials without putting off the business community.

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Speaking of green credentials: Which is "greener"—trees or solar panels? This odd question is at issue in a recent California case in which a couple has been ordered to cut down redwood trees in their backyard because the trees cast a shadow over their neighbor's solar panels. The neighbor with the solar panels—who installed the panels even though he knew they would be in the shade—filed a complaint with the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office, and the redwoods' owners have been charged with violating the Solar Shade Control Act, a little-known state law that has been on the books since 1978.

"It's actually better for the environment to put solar on your roof than to plant a tree," Kurt Newick, who sells solar panels and chairs a global warming committee for the Sierra Club, told the *San Jose Mercury News*. "On average, a tree only sequesters fourteen pounds of carbon dioxide a year and a solar electric system offsets that every two or three days." Perhaps. But there is something exceedingly strange about a calculus that measures the worth of a tree based how much carbon dioxide it offsets. As one of the redwoods' owners put it, "We support solar power, but we thought common sense would prevail."

The International Association of Athletics Federations ruled in January 2008 that South African double-amputee sprinter Oscar Pistorius is ineligible to compete in the Beijing Olympics this summer because his prosthetic legs give him a "demonstrable mechanical advantage." Pistorius, who was born without fibulas—a bone between the knee and ankle—had both legs amputated below the knee when he was eleven months old; he uses prosthetic racing blades when he runs. A German professor who studied Pistorius found that he can run at the same speed as others on about a quarter less energy, and that the returned energy "from the prosthetic blade is close to three times higher than with the human ankle joint in maximum sprinting." It is a remarkable testament to the quality of modern prosthetics that someone so equipped could be considered competitive at the Olympic level—but the decision to exclude Pistorius is still a wise one, seeking as it does to preserve the competitive essence of the sport.

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New evidence bolsters the prevailing scientific consensus that there is no link between vaccines and autism. The California Department of Public Health reported in January 2008 that the rate of autism in the state has continued to rise despite the decision several years ago to remove from childhood vaccines a compound called thimerosal—a mercury-based preservative that some people believe is linked to the disorder. (For a full

examination of the vaccines and autism controversy, see Caitrin Nicol's article in the Fall 2007 issue of *The New Atlantis*.) Since 2001, California children have received no thimerosal in vaccinations; if mercury were responsible for autism, there should have been a drop in diagnoses beginning in 2004 or so. However, a study in the journal *Archives of Psychiatry* showed that the rate of autism rose unchecked from 1995 through 2007.

Closely following this finding, a new study in the journal *Pediatrics* reported that babies in Buenos Aires, where thimerosal is still used in vaccines, do not retain the mercury from vaccines in their bloodstream. Periodic blood tests showed that while most of them had pre-existing levels of methyl mercury, the toxic kind of mercury found in the environment with a retention half-life of 44 days, the ethyl mercury administered in the vaccines had a half-life of only 3.7 days. "Until recently, that longer half-life was assumed to be the rule for both types of mercury," said the lead author of the study, Dr. Michael Pichichero. "Now it's obvious that ethyl mercury's short half-life prevents toxic build-up from occurring. It's just gone too fast."

Meanwhile, researchers at the University of Chicago and the Boston-based Autism Consortium have found a strong genetic basis for some cases of autism. Scientists with the Autism Consortium reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that a missing or duplicated patch of genes on chromosome 16 is responsible for one

percent of all cases of autism. In most cases the mutation appears not to be inherited, but to have occurred sometime during development. While this mutation affects only a small proportion of autistics, the finding is significant as a concrete step in the search for causes of the notoriously puzzling disorder.

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Plastic bags in grocery stores are soon to be as environmentally uncool as plastic containers used for bottled water. Some American supermarket chains have announced plans to stop offering free plastic bags to customers, the *Washington Post* recently reported. This follows on the heels of a law enacted this past November by the city of San Francisco which outlaws large grocery stores from supplying bags made with anything less than 40 percent recycled paper. Overseas, some countries (such as Ireland) have instituted a tax on plastic bags, while others (such as Bangladesh, with China and Australia soon to follow), have banned plastic bags completely.

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Social-networking websites are becoming playgrounds for organized crime among young people, according to Susan Manheimer, police chief of San Mateo, California: "We're seeing our gangs...looking more and more to those middle schoolers and the younger kids to recruit," using sites such as MySpace and YouTube, where kids, often unwittingly, download music and pictures that glorify street gangs, making them "prey to predators." Gang recruiters can seek

out these profiles and contact the individuals to develop closer relationships.

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On January 24—the feast day of St. Francis de Sales, a patron saint of writers—Pope Benedict XVI spoke of a need for an “info-ethics,” just as “we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life.” Acknowledging that the modern media is indispensable, he said “it would truly be difficult to foster and strengthen understanding between nations, to breathe life into peace dialogues around the globe, to guarantee the primary good of access to information, while at the same time ensuring the free circulation of ideas.” However, he cautioned, the media risks being “used for ideological purposes or for the aggressive advertising of consumer products,” or

“systems aimed at subjecting humanity to agendas dictated by the dominant interests of the day.”

He further noted that the media “seems increasingly to claim not simply to represent reality, but to determine it, owing to the power and force of suggestion that it possesses.” Since “we are dealing with realities that have a profound effect on all those dimensions of human life...in which the good of the person is at stake...not everything that is technically possible is also ethically permissible.” When the media “no longer [takes] into account the centrality and inviolable dignity of the human person,” it risks being “a negative influence on people’s consciences and choices and definitively conditioning their freedom and their very lives.”