

Humanity, Society and Ecology: Global Warming and the Ecosocialist Alternative

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Ecosocialism is much more than a new label, or a revamping of an old perspective: it is a new project for the emancipation of humanity.

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Humanity produces its own life, through labour as a conscious social activity. This basic characteristic of our species has two important consequences for a discussion of ecology.

The first is that humanity doesn’t just evolve biologically, as other species do, but also develops itself through history. As it develops, passing through different modes of production, it changes its relationship with the environment and changes the environment itself. That is why our species has such an impact on the environment. The nature of our impact is not fated in advance: more development does not automatically imply more environmental destruction. For example, in some regions agricultural communities probably put less pressure on the environment than hunting communities that used fire as a means of production. The relationship between human development and the environment is dialectical. We have choices. Development does not necessary imply material, quantitative growth. Within certain limits, we can develop while protecting the environment.

The second consequence is that knowledge of homo sapiens’s biological characteristics doesn’t help us to understand any particular problem in the relationship between humanity and nature. On the contrary, the decisive role is played by socially and historically conditioned forms of development. To seek an explanation or solutions for modern environmental crises by studying the history of Easter Island, or the Mayan collapse, as Jared Diamond does in his bestseller *Collapse*, is pure nonsense. The Neolithic civilisation on Easter Island had no nuclear power, didn’t use pesticides and didn’t burn fossil fuels.

Ignoring history and the concrete mode of production in a discussion of humanity and nature can only lead to a seemingly trite but very dangerous conclusion: that, other things being equal, the more human beings there are on Earth, the more ecological problems we create. That in turn leads to just one question: How many people should there be? James Lovelock, author of the Gaïa hypothesis, says 500 million, others say 3 billion. Who will decide? Above all: with that diagnosis, how can we democratically address an urgent ecological problem like global warming? According to the IPCC, global GHG emissions should decrease by 50% to 85% by 2050. Faced with such a great challenge, obsessive “Population Bomb” thinking can only pave the way for a new barbarism — which is why, while not in the least favoring pro-natalist policies, the left should consider the

“overpopulation” debate as an important ideological battlefield.

Peculiarities of the capitalist environmental crisis

To address the environmental crisis both realistically and humanely, it is absolutely necessary to understand the specific social and historical characteristics of the capitalist environmental crisis, and to understand the differences between capitalism and previous modes of production. Pre-capitalist modes of production produced use-values, quantitatively limited by human needs. Labour productivity was low, and growth occurred very slowly. Social crises involved shortages of use-values.

Capitalism produces exchange-values, not use-values as such. Its only limit, as Marx said, is capital itself. Over-production and over-consumption (the first conditioning the second) are inherent in this highly productive system, which is based on ever more profit and ever more growth to produce profit. Social crises involve overproduction of commodities — that is, of exchange-values.

These basic differences shape very important distinctions between present and past ecological crises.

Previous ecological crises, in so-called primitive societies for instance, mainly involved low production communities looting natural resources as a response to food shortages caused by droughts, flooding, or wars.

Capitalism also loots nature, but in a very different way: capitalist looting aims to obtain and sell exchange values, not to satisfy needs, so it causes more environmental degradation than previous societies.

But an even more important difference — a qualitative one — is that capitalist ecological crises mainly proceed from overproduction and the resulting overconsumption. Not only does capitalism use more resources, it does so by developing environmentally dangerous technologies. Each capitalist tries to get surplus profit, also called technological rent, by replacing human labour with machines, chemicals, etc., to improve productivity. Among other problems, this race for more productivity, this permanent revolution in production, leads to the development and use of new technologies like nuclear power, new molecules like DDT or PCB, and even new genetically modified organisms.

Climate change must be seen within that framework.

That might seem obvious, but it is not. The IPCC's reports — which are excellent, especially those from Workgroups I and II — label global warming as “anthropic,” which is misleading. *Global warming is not a result of human activity in general but of capitalist human activity.* Indeed global warming is the purest and more perfect example of a capitalist environmental crisis: it is a direct result of overproduction. Today's atmosphere is saturated with CO₂, due to the massive burning of fossil fuels — coal, oil, gas — in imperialist countries since the Industrial Revolution. Climate Change is the global inheritance of 250 years of capitalist accumulation.

‘Those who don't want to hear about capitalism should not talk about global

warming’

Of course, coal, which contributes most to global warming, was essential to the birth of the modern economy. But within a few years, scientific discoveries had made it possible to consider alternative technological paths based on renewable energy sources. The photovoltaic effect, for instance, was discovered by Edmond Becquerel as early as 1839. Prototypes were even built. For reasons of profit, capitalism did not invest in this technology until the NASA decided to use it for space vehicles. Thermal solar systems existed by the end of the 19th century, but utilities sabotaged them. Even today, solar energy is not a clear priority for energy research programs: Most budgets are devoted to the development of nuclear energy, a backward step that could turn in a real nightmare.

So, in our struggle against climate change, we have to face the major, fundamental fact that the capitalist mode of production has been built on burning fossil fuels, to the exclusion of other energy sources. One major reason — not the only one — is that fossil fuels reserves can be *owned*, and that those who own them then have the monopoly on the resource. Because they have that monopoly, they can impose a monopoly price, a rent above the average rate of profit. The higher cost of less productive reserves, not the average cost, determines the market price, so that those who produce at a lower cost get a higher than average profit.

A few figures illustrate how unimaginably huge this rent is. The global turnover in the oil industry in total is about 2,000 billion Euros. Production costs total about 500 Euros. Assuming a “normal” return of 15%, the rent amounts to at least 1400 billion Euros a year, above the average profit. This is a goose laying golden eggs. No wonder that those who own the goose want it to continue laying eggs as long as possible.

Another reason why capitalism depends on fossil fuels is that they enable very centralised and standardised energy systems, a high degree of social control, and a uniform market that favours corporate investment. This trend began very early, as capitalist competition eliminated traditional forms of decentralised and carbon-free energy production such as small water and wind mills.

Orkheimer, a German philosopher, once said, “Those who don’t want to hear about capitalism should not talk about fascism.” Similarly we can say, “Those who don’t want to hear about capitalism should not talk about global warming.”

Towards a new capitalist climate policy?

Is it possible to stop global warming, and if so, how? People who ask this question are usually concerned about technological possibilities, but generally speaking, technology is not the principal problem in the struggle against climate change, for two reasons.

- On the one hand, there’s massive inefficiency and huge energy waste in developed capitalist societies. The main problem is not energy waste by individuals (although that is important and we should all try to reduce it) but rather structural energy waste resulting from separate heat and power production, absurd transportation systems, weapons production, advertising, disposable products, etc, — all related to greed for profit.
- On the other hand, the solar energy that reaches the Earth surface is 10,000 times the global energy requirement, and, using various forms of current technology, we could use it to generate 10 times global needs, a figure that could improve very quickly.

According to the IPCC 4th assessment report and the famous footnote in the Bali roadmap, by 2050 emissions in developed countries should decrease by 80-95%, while emissions in developing countries should “deviate substantially from baseline,” compared to 1990 levels. This is necessary to restrict the temperature increase to about 2°C above pre-industrial level. It is important to stress that these figures are underestimates, because they don’t fully take into account non-linear phenomena such as the disintegration of glaciers in Greenland and Antarctica, one of the major threats we face today. So the IPCC recommendations should be taken as a minimum.

The question is: is it possible to meet these objectives in such a short time span? The short answer is: yes, it will be difficult, but it can be done through a plan that combines three measures: structural measures to cut energy waste, improved energy efficiency, and massive shift to a publicly owned decentralised energy system based on renewables.

But:

- Cutting energy waste is contrary to unlimited capitalist growth and accumulation of exchange-values;
- Improved energy efficiency is contrary to profit maximisation by utilities, oil companies, etc.;
- And most renewable energy sources cost more, and so reduce profit.

So for now, capitalists are waiting for a time when renewables are more profitable than fossil fuels. In the meantime, they demand that public authorities pay them to develop renewables. They lobby governments to overallocate free emissions allowances that they can sell on the market (as the EU does in the European Emission Trading System, another goose laying golden eggs). They develop nuclear power plants, telling us nuclear is a carbon-free carbon technology, which is totally untrue — if the entire nuclear production chain is considered, it produces more emissions than a modern natural gas power production chain. They transform so-called “clean investments” in developing countries into emission credits, rights to pollute — golden eggs once again. They appropriate natural ecosystems in the South to compensate for their own emissions: in other words they appropriate the carbon cycle, which amounts to appropriating control of life on Earth.

In short, capitalists seek to determine the rhythm and the direction of the struggle against climate change, tying both to their need for profit — and the governments go along. In July, the G8 leaders said they were in favour of a 50% global emission reduction by 2050. They didn’t mention the specific IPCC recommendation of an 80%-95% reduction in developed countries, nor the 85% global reduction, nor the intermediate goals proposed by the IPCC. Where did the G8 target come from? Well, it was “suggested” to the G8 leaders by the World Economic Forum, in a memo posted a few days before the summit.

Those who deny the reality of climate change have been defeated. I think governments will do something to address climate change. I doubt they will keep even their vague promise of a 50% reduction by 2050, but they will have to do something a bit more serious than Kyoto, which is peanuts. But if we let them control the process, they will do too little, too late, and do it in a way that will be socially extremely costly and unfair.

The social and ecological consequences of a new, global capitalist climate policy could be terrible indeed. Hundreds of millions of people, mostly poor people in poor countries, will face more coastal floods, more malaria, and more food shortages. Billions face water shortages. Remember Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Most of the 1500 casualties were poor people, black people, women and children who died because money that could have strengthened levies was spent for the war on Iraq,

and because the city, state and federal authorities didn't evacuate the poor. Katrina may offer a preview of the catastrophes we will face in the future.

These won't be natural catastrophes but capitalist catastrophes. As James Hansen, NASA's chief climatologist, said to the US Congress in June: "Special interests have blocked transition to our renewable energy future. Instead of moving heavily into renewable energies, fossil companies choose to spread doubt about global warming, as tobacco companies discredited the smoking-cancer link. CEOs of fossil energy companies know what they are doing and are aware of long-term consequences of continued business as usual. In my opinion, these CEOs should be tried for high crimes against humanity and nature."

Social mobilisation, demands and the ecosocialist perspective

What conclusions should we draw? Climate change is not simply an environmental question but also a major human and social issue that anticapitalist currents must respond to. I would like to stress three points.

First, activists should help build a global climate movement. December 2009 will be an important time for a demonstration in Copenhagen where the United Nations will be trying to negotiate a post-Kyoto international treaty. To put maximum pressure on the governments, we need to help build a mass movement on a single issue: for an international treaty that is environmentally efficient and socially fair to the developing world and to working people in general.

Second, we need to raise proposals and demands that link climate and social struggles. This is a key question, a pre-condition for success. Bourgeois climate change policies are becoming a class weapon against poor and working people worldwide. If the struggle against climate change means more austerity, lower wages, more flexibility for the bosses, more job losses, more unfair taxes, etc, then the workers will resist, and they will be right to do so.

Look at the Polish mineworkers, a key sector of the workers movement. A few months ago, they won a fight for better wages and labour conditions. This was a victory for the international workers movement, because it was a victory against social dumping, in Europe and elsewhere. If the EU attacks the miners in name of the struggle against climate change, they will fight back because they know that the EU's real goal is to break their social strength. But we also know that continuing burning coal even for 30 years would be suicidal. (The development of safe Carbon Capture and Storage technology might reduce this danger, but CCS would not be a structural solution to climate change.)

Linking social and climate demands is especially important in the context of the systemic financial crisis and deep economic recession. The economic situation may reduce public concern about climate change, but it could also increase support for red-green demands such as public ownership of natural resources, free public transportation, expropriation of utilities, public service for home insulation, retraining of workers occupied in heavy polluting industries, etc.

Third, it is obvious that climate change challenges the socialist alternative. May I remind you Lenin once defined socialism as equal to soviets plus electricity? It is crystal clear that this formula as such is no longer valid. But what kind power is needed? Green power or nuclear power? How will it be produced? How much is needed? What are the ecological consequences? These are basic questions, and we know from history that a non-capitalist society won't automatically find the answers — so the socialist alternative must be profoundly redefined in a non-productivist way.

This is a huge challenge to socialism, but a complete revision isn't needed. There is a concept in

Marx's writing that can help us: the concept of a rational management of the social metabolism, of the material exchanges between humanity and nature. In fact, climate change is precisely the product of irrational management of the social metabolism: the world economy emits about 10 gigatonnes of carbon a year into the atmosphere, double the absorption capacity of forests and oceans.

Building not only a socially rational but also an ecologically rational alternative to this irrational system will have far-reaching consequences for the socialist project. Socialism only makes sense if the new power of associated producers — another classic definition of socialism — steadily but radically replaces the capitalist production apparatus with a totally different one, based on a different energy system. This means different systems based on other technologies for food production, transportation, land management, etc.

So ecosocialism is much more than a new label, or a revamping of an old perspective: it is a new project for the emancipation of humanity.

P.S.

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