

Faced with the climate crisis: Capitalism, 'decreasing' and ecosocialism

Sunday 21 December 2008, by [TANURO Daniel](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2008).

Climate change is much more than one ecological problem among others: it is the chemically pure expression of the fact that the irrepressible capitalist logic of accumulation is leading humanity to destroy the environment in which civilizations have developed for six thousand years.

The only way to ward off the danger is by radically reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and therefore similarly reducing flows of energy and matter. Time is short. The enormity of the challenge, the vertiginous scale of the policies that need to be implemented, the urgency of their implementation and the coincidence with the most serious economic crisis since 1929 are suddenly giving a very concrete meaning to the ecosocialist perspective, a meaning which is both anti-capitalist and anti-productivist.

Contents

- [A Herculean effort](#)
- [Behind the declarations of \(...\)](#)
- [To discuss with the "decreaser"](#)
- [It is not enough to replace](#)
- [Ecosocialism](#)

The left did not pay the necessary attention to the evaluation report made public in 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Superficial impressions concerning the disappointing balance sheet of the United Nations conference in Bali (December 2007) diverted attention from the documents that had been prepared by the experts. However, the conclusions arising from these documents have major implications for any socio-political project - in particular for the world socialist project of satisfaction of democratically determined human needs.

The conclusions to be drawn from the report of the IPCC can be synthesized in the following way:

- * the industrialized countries must reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by between 80 and 95 per cent between now and 2050, including an intermediate reduction of from 25 to 40 per cent in 2020 (compared to 1990);
- * the developing countries must "substantially deviate" (by between 15 and 30 per cent) from the "business as usual" scenario of reference from 2020 onwards (2050 for the countries of Africa);
- * world emissions must culminate in 2015 at the latest and then decrease regularly in order to be reduced by between 50 and 85 per cent in 2050 (compared to 2000);
- * the decrease in emissions must continue beyond 2050, until their total suppression between 2060 and the end of the century, depending on the region. "Negative emissions" (of atmospheric

absorptions of CO₂) may even be necessary for the stabilization of the climate.

A Herculean effort

The reports of the IPCC do not, strictly speaking, talk about “recommendations”. However, there is no doubt that, among the scenarios examined by the experts, the combination of measures summarized above is the one that it is advisable to adopt if we seriously want to fight against climate change. Indeed, it is the only one which makes it possible to fulfil at the same time two indispensable conditions, respectively relating to the maximum limitation of the socio-ecological impact of global warming and to North-South justice:

- * 1) to maintain the rise in average temperature on the surface of the globe at between 2 and 2.4°C;
- * 2) to act in accordance with the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”.

In 1996, the Council of Ministers of the European Union set itself the goal of not exceeding a rise of 2°C compared to the preindustrial period. The last report of the IPCC no longer speaks of a scenario that would make it possible to achieve this goal. However, it is a goal which remains more relevant than ever: thus, the table recapitulating the consequences of global warming, in the 2007 report, shows clearly that beyond a rise of 1.7°C compared to 1780 (+1.3°C compared to the present), the impact is likely to become very alarming, in particular in terms of shortage of water, agricultural production and human health [1]. But the acceleration of global warming is such that it is probably no longer possible not to exceed +2°C... It is thus imperative to adopt the most radical objectives of the IPCC for the reduction of emissions, such as they appear above, and even to consider them as the minimum that must be reached. Not to do so amounts to condemning hundreds of millions of poor people, mainly in the poor countries, whereas their responsibility for climate change is non-existent or extremely limited.

This brings us to the second condition: the respect of the principle of “common but shared responsibilities”. Inscribed in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, Rio1992), it refers to the fact that the developed countries are historically responsible for more than 70 per cent of the warming of the atmosphere, of which the countries of the South are the main victims [2]. So the North must not only carry the greatest part of the effort of reduction in emissions, but also help the South to adapt to the part of climate change that has become inevitable and transfer clean technologies to it, so that its development does not involve a further worsening of the climate. It is very important that these points were included in the Framework Convention. The countries of the South will defend them fiercely, because they condition their right to development and respond to a fundamental demand for justice in the management of the climate crisis.

Let us come back now to the conclusions arising from the 2007 report of the IPCC and dwell on their implications. The gas with the greatest greenhouse effect is carbon dioxide (CO₂) and the most important source of this gas is the combustion of fossil energies (coal, oil, natural gas) in order to produce electricity, heat or movement. Four elements must be taken into account here:

- (i) energy is the condition for any work, therefore any economic activity;
- (ii) the combustion of fossil fuels provides 80 per cent of power consumption on a world level;
- iii) as shown, the rise in greenhouse gas emissions is ascribable primarily to the increasing emission of fossil CO₂ emissions by the energy sector [3];

(iv) energy infrastructures imply heavy investments, whose lifespan is from 30 to 40 years.

Under these conditions, it is not difficult to understand that the objectives of reduction to be realized in forty years to save the climate, and to do so while respecting North-South justice, represent a collective effort without precedent in the history of human society. An effort all the more Herculean in that it must be carried out on a world scale, in a context dominated by enormous inequalities of development.

Behind the declarations of intent, the disarray of governments

Is capitalism able to take up this challenge? We can answer in an empirical way by noting (1) that it has not done so up until now, and (2) that it is not preparing to do so. The first point does not require long demonstrations: forty years went by between the first warnings of scientists and the signature of the Kyoto Protocol, which is ridiculously insufficient. The second point is somewhat obscured today by an escalation of ambitious political declarations which seem to testify - finally! - to an awakening on the part of the governments. But when we look more closely, we can see that there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip.

Gordon Brown and Barack Obama have recently come out in favour of a reduction of emissions by 80 per cent in 2050, but that does not commit them to much. Indeed, if 2050 is terribly close on the climate clock, it is very distant on the political clock. Consequently, if it is not associated with a concrete plan, the most radical objective can in practice have only a decorative function.

During the presidential campaign, the new president of the USA beefed up his programme, going suddenly from 60 per cent to 80 per cent of reduction in emissions between now and 2050. That enabled him to differentiate himself from his Republican rival, more clearly marking the rupture with George W Bush. We can only be pleased about that but, in reality, Washington will have a more modest objective: to reduce by 2020 US emissions to their level of 1990. A considerable effort, certainly (minus approximately 20 per cent compared to the current level)... but completely insufficient: the United States, according to Kyoto, should have, by 2012, been 5 per cent below the level of 1990; as for the fourth report of the IPCC, it should incite the USA to reach at least 40 per cent of reduction in emissions between now and 2020 [4].

Gordon Brown will follow in Obama's footsteps: 80 per cent reduction in 2050. According to the British press, the occupant of 10, Downing Street quite simply does not have any idea of how the United Kingdom could concretize this commitment. Let us not make a target of him: nobody, among the liberal economists, knows how to proceed. Working Group III of the IPCC compiled the "bottom up" studies dealing with the economic potential for reduction of emissions by sector [5]. Coming from a background of academic science, the authors proceeded according to neo-liberal ideology, which claims that there is unemployment because labour is too expensive and too much fossil CO₂ in the atmosphere because it is too cheap. So they estimated the quantity of greenhouse gases which they could prevent from being rejected at a cost lower than 100 dollars a ton. In conclusion, that does not lead to ecological effectiveness: at the price of 100 dollars a ton of CO₂ equivalent, we would scarcely manage, in 2030, to stabilize the total quantity of carbon sent into the atmosphere at the level of 2000. That is not how the world economy will manage to reduce its emissions by 50 to 85 per cent in 2050... Is it necessary to double or triple the price of carbon? [6].

To discuss with the “decreasers”

The increase in fossil fuels will no more save the climate than wage moderation, for thirty years, has restored full employment. A purely formal analogy? No, the basic reason is the same: the incapacity of capitalism to decrease the production of goods other than by periodic crises involving social misery and waste of wealth. Crises whose only advantage - if we can say that - is to temporarily decrease the pressure on the environment. To save the climate requires a radical reduction of fossil carbon emissions. To abolish unemployment implies a radical reduction of working time, without increase in the rate of work or loss of wages, and with proportionate hiring of additional workers. In both cases, it is the capitalist logic of accumulation which is challenged.

This point of view invites the left to somewhat change its attitude to the current known as “decreasing”. On the ideological level, we should thoroughly mistrust certain spokespersons of this trend, who, following the example of Serge Latouche, amalgamate growth and development, then development and capitalism, ultimately relying on a “pedagogy of catastrophes”. On the scientific level, we can only express scepticism towards the “fourth principle of thermodynamics” imagined by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, for whom the increase of entropy (measurement of disorder) is a fundamental characteristic of life, and even of matter. On the level of the perception of social realities, finally, we have to distinguish ourselves from those who consider workers only as candidates for overconsumption, accessories to the destruction of the planet, and not as exploited producers, whose collective action is a lever for change.

Nevertheless, the “decreasers” are right on an important point, which Marxists balk at accepting: in the developed capitalist countries, the priority measure to protect the climate is not to deploy new green technologies, but to radically decrease the consumption of energy, and this reduction implies a decrease in the exchanges of matter between humanity and nature. As for the countries of the South, their development must be of another type than that of the countries of the North, otherwise they will increasingly take responsibility for the destruction of the climate. So it is not enough to say: “growth or decreasing, that is not the question”. GDP is certainly inappropriate for guiding social and ecological policies, because it only takes into account the quantity of value. Its decrease no more leads to ecological sustainability than its growth would be synonymous with social progress. But understanding this should not mask the need for reducing energy consumption. However, this reduction is not possible solely by removing waste: it is also necessary to decrease the non-renewable removal of resources, therefore to produce less.

It is not enough to replace fossil fuels by renewable energies

The climate challenge illustrates well where the problem lies. The present technical potential of renewable energies (solar in its various forms and geothermics) is equivalent to 7 to 10 times the world consumption of energy. There is no doubt that this potential is likely to increase considerably with progress in science and technique. So in the abstract, we can imagine an energy mutation that would allow us to quickly leave behind us the era of oil, coal and gas. Paradoxically, this reasoning is the foundation of both the hopes of the partisans of a green capitalism and the proposals of a certain radical left which simply reduces the fight for the climate to the expropriation of capital and the replacement of fossil energy sources by renewable energies. However, the question is more complex, because of the combination of very short time scales, extremely drastic reductions and the profound change that the passage to an energy system based exclusively on renewable energies implies.

Let us make it clear: we are employing here the concept of ‘energy system’ in the broad sense

defined by Barry Commoner and developed by Jean-Paul Deléage [7]: the energy system of a mode of production is characterized by the sources, the converters, the degree of centralization and the efficiency on various levels. The solar source is diffuse and usable in various forms which are not all available in all regions and which require the use of specific converters (wind farms, wave energy, thermal panels, converters of biomass, photovoltaic panels, etc). So the new energy system to be built will have at the same time to be managed centrally on the level of the networks (which is contrary to the frenetic liberalization of energy markets which is sweeping Europe and the USA) and be very decentralized on the level of the use of sources, consumption and maintenance. It is not excluded that this system, once set up and improved by technological advances, will prove itself to be very efficient and will open up new possibilities for development. But this futuristic vision does not enable us to solve the problems of the transition in a way that is favourable to both the exploited and the environment. On the contrary, the success of the transition from those points of view requires the deconstruction of certain elements of the system, which obviously raises, for the left, the crucial question of the reconversion of the workers who are employed there.

We can take the example of transport, which is characteristic and highlights the utility of the concept of energy system as a global concept, incorporating agriculture (from the point of view which occupies us here, indeed, agriculture is just an accumulation of converters of luminous energy into biochemical energy). The capitalist sector of transport consumes annually 1500 million litres of fuel. The production of ethanol and biodiesel hardly comes to 20 million litres. However, this limited figure is enough to cause serious ecological damage, a wave of appropriation of land in the countries of the South (combined with forced displacements of indigenous and peasant communities), not to mention that fact that it makes a significant contribution to the rise in the prices of food products, and thus to malnutrition, diseases, etc. It is obvious that this massive production of biofuels from food crops must be denounced and fought vigorously. Shaken by the wave of contestation around this issue, the capitalists who are responsible for these projects announce that the problem will soon be solved by the production of second generation biofuels (manufactured from plant cellulose). But the concrete plans of an oil giant like BP show that this is not at all the case [8]. On the contrary, this new chain, which links biofuels and GM crops, is likely to have even more frightening consequences, in particular from the point of view of biodiversity and of the appropriation of ecosystems.

Ecosocialism

In the real capitalist world, the answer to climate change is declined according to the needs for valorisation of the many competitor capitals. However, in order to have a superprofit higher than that of his rivals, each entrepreneur will seek to replace living labour by more productive machines, from which will flow increasingly larger quantities of goods aiming to satisfy solvable demand. This logic of accumulation, productivist, is inseparable from capitalism. It is the fundamental reason why climate change represents the squaring of the circle for this mode of production. It is certainly obliged to answer it, but in its own way, which will inevitably imply even more violently attacking “the only two sources of all wealth: the land and the worker” (Marx). The workers, the peasants and the poor of the world are thus caught between the hammer and the anvil: global warming, of which they are and will always and increasingly be the main victims, and capitalist climate policy which presents them with the bill for an energy transition that is oriented according to the requirements of profit.

In this context, the ecosocialist perspective suddenly takes on a very concrete meaning. To save the climate requires a radical reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, corresponding at the very least to the recommendations of the IPCC. This reduction in its turn implies a reduction in the

overproduction and overconsumption of material goods in the rich countries (as well as the suppression pure and simple of useless or harmful sectors, those which waste energy: armament production, etc). Indispensable for rescuing the climate, this decrease can go hand in hand with a substantial improvement of the conditions of existence and quality of life of the working class, on three conditions, which are linked: 1) reconversion of workers and a generalized and large-scale reduction of working time (to half a day's work); 2) a redistribution of wealth (the rich will be less rich, the poor will be less poor); 3) contesting capitalist property relations, in particular in the energy sector. It is rather obvious that the realization of these conditions will encounter considerable difficulties, given the present relationship of forces. But attitudes can change quickly under the whiplashes of the crisis. We can see this with the debacle of the Stock Exchange, which overnight put on the agenda demands such as nationalization and expropriation. There exists a space to argue in favour of public plans combining the satisfaction of social needs and environmental protection. It is up to the partisans of ecosocialism to occupy this space with their proposals.

P.S.

* Translation from the French by International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV # 407 - December 2008.

* Daniel Tanuro, a certified agriculturalist and eco-socialist environmentalist, writes for "La gauche", (the monthly of the LCR-SAP, Belgian section of the Fourth International), and Inprecor.

Footnotes

[1] Figure RiD.7, page 21 on
<http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-r...>

[2] Fig. 2: <http://www.globalwarmingart.com/wik...>

[3] Fig. 3 page 328 on
<http://www.mnp.nl/edgar/Images/Oliv...>

[4] To take account of the fact that the US economy is twice more intensive in fossil fuels than its European competitors, the USA must be in the higher part of the scale of reductions (- 25 to -40%)

[5] Fig. RiD.10 on
<http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-r...>

[6] 1,000 litres of fuel oil corresponds to 2.7 tons of CO₂.

[7] Barry Commoner, "The Poverty off Power.". Jean-Paul Deléage and others, "Les servitudes de la puissance".

[8] See on the internet the polemics around the creation of the Energy Bioscience Institute, founded by BP on the campus of the University of Berkeley and financed by the company to the tune of 500 million dollars.