

Anti-capitalism and environmentalism as a political alternative

Saturday 24 September 2011, by [VIVAS Esther](#) (Date first published: 28 April 2011).

We cannot analyse the global ecological crisis separately from the crisis in which we are immersed or the critique of the economic model that has led us into it.

Contents

- [Paradigm shift](#)
- [The global food system](#)
- [An ecological and social \(...\)](#)
- [Be angry and organize](#)
- [Another left from below](#)

The starting point for today's debate is to note that humanity is in a global ecological crisis that is an intrinsic part of the systemic crisis of capitalism. And one of the differences from past economic crises, from that of the 1970s or the crash of 1929, is precisely its ecological aspect.

Indeed, we cannot analyse the global ecological crisis separately from the crisis in which we are immersed or the critique of the economic model that has led us into it. It is also necessary to reject outright the logic of profit maximization of the capitalist system and the productivist orientation which takes no account of the limits of planet Earth.

The reality is that we are witnessing a crisis of civilization that has multiple dimensions: a crisis of ecology, food, care, finance, and as José Saramago says, ethics and morality.

A crisis which puts on the agenda the inability of the capitalist system to meet the basic needs of the majority of the population and threatens the very survival of humanity.

Therefore, we are not in a passing crisis. The crisis is going to last. And there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Or worse yet, as argued by the philosopher Slavo Žižek, the light at the end of the tunnel has proved to be that of a train approaching us at full speed.

This is demonstrated by the rescue plans which have been applied to Greece, Portugal and Ireland, the adjustment measures of the Zapatero government and the cuts announced in many other countries of the European Union. We have a true "social war in Europe". An offensive that seeks to end the few social rights that still exist in the continent, which companies consider a burden to their competitiveness in the global economy.

The crisis shows the urgent need to change the world from below. And this is the starting point for me to confront the ecological crisis, and do so from a radical anti-capitalist and environmental perspective.

Given the state of the planet, what seems strange to me is not being anti-capitalist, but not being so. It is they who defend this model, a capitalist system generating poverty, inequality and war, who

should justify themselves. Thus anti-capitalism emerges as a double imperative: moral and strategic.

In fact, the failure of past climate summits in Copenhagen (December 2009) and Cancun (December 2010) illustrates the inability of capitalism to solve and respond to a crisis it has itself created. Both meetings proved to be an abject failure and a missed opportunity where not even the hollow rhetoric and the pomp of the heads of state could hide the lack of real measures approved.

The agreement at Cancun showed that we are dealing with a dead end. Its aim, as noted by Daniel Tanuro, was to give the impression there was a pilot in the plane. But, in reality, there is no pilot. Or rather, the only pilot there is the automatic one. And that is capital's race without limits to maximise profits. It places short-sighted interests and electoral tactics above the long term needs of people and nature.

In fact, the Copenhagen and Cancun meetings made it clear that there is no political will to respond to the climate and ecological crisis we face. A real solution would require profound social and economic transformations. And we have seen, clearly, there is no will to carry them out.

False solutions to climate change arise, technological responses, within the framework of green capitalism, as if technology could save us from the impasse to which the capitalist system has brought us. A good example is the attempt in recent years by the pro-nuclear lobby to present nuclear energy as an alternative to the oil crisis. An "operation" that has come crashing down to earth with the accident at Fukushima, in Japan, which shows how nuclear energy, in the words of Michael Löwy, brings disaster like a storm cloud.

In fact, the central cause of the climate crisis is denied: the logic of this usurper system, of growth without limits, which is capitalism and which has led us to an unprecedented global crisis.

Paradigm shift

In this way, the crisis poses the need for a radical paradigm shift and this paradigm shift has to take place from an anti-capitalist perspective. But what do we mean by anti-capitalism?

Anti-capitalism is a term that has been imposed for a horizon of breaking with the existing order of things. The negative nature of the concept has often been critically noted, but this is only a half-truth as anti-capitalism, as is understood by good part of those of us who are in this camp, flows directly in the formulation of alternative proposals to the dominant policies that aim towards another model of society.

Proposals such as demanding that the banking system is at the service of the people and that it should not be at the service of a few to do business. The nationalization of the banks is necessary. Demanding, likewise, universal access to housing and the creation of a public housing stock. How can it be understood today that there are people without houses and homes without people? In the Spanish state, there were 250,000 evictions in 2010 and three million empty apartments.

Anti-capitalism begins with the rejection of the existing in order to defend another logic opposed to that of capital and domination. The limits of the term are, to some extent, the limits of the current phase, still that of resistance and (re) construction, marked by the difficulty of expressing a positive strategic perspective and the horizon of an alternative society.

Indeed, the grand narratives designating models of society, like socialism or communism, have an equivocal meaning today due to the failure of the 20th century emancipatory projects. Founding

experience are needed which can impose new concepts or recover the old ones to designate an alternative project of society.

And for us anti-capitalism and ecology are two struggles that must be closely linked. Any prospect of breaking with the current economic model that does not take into account, as a central element, the ecological crisis is totally doomed to failure. At the same time, any environmentalist perspective without a clearly anti-capitalist orientation, of rupture with this system, is totally disoriented, stays on the surface of the problem and could end up being an instrument at the service of green capitalism and marketing policies. It is necessary to stand apart from institutionalized environmentalism and place the environmental battle within a logic of change of system. We do not want to put a green veneer on the current model, we want to change it.

Curbing climate change and tackling the global ecological crisis involves modifying from the roots the model of production, distribution and consumption, and not simple measures or cosmetic tinkering. Solutions to the ecological crisis will affect the foundations of the capitalist system. By affecting the "hard disk" of this model.

Global capitalism is based on privatization and the massive commodification of the common property of humankind and nature and is incompatible with the preservation of the balance of the ecosystem. There are many examples that show how capitalist logic is responsible for the ecological crisis and how a serious environmentalist policy must deal with the private interests of large companies.

The global food system

A highly visible case is, for example, how the global food system functions. The model of production, distribution and consumption is in the hands of a handful of multinationals that control the agri-food chain, from producer to final consumer, and determine what, how, where from and what price is paid to the producer for what we eat. A monopoly based on the market in seeds, where currently some ten companies globally control 70% of marketing, via food processing, through to distribution in the supermarkets. And these companies put their own interests above our food needs and respect for the environment.

In fact, the agricultural and food chain has been extending increasingly causing a loss of autonomy of the peasantry with regard to the same and a total ignorance of the consumer as to what we buy. We do not know what we eat, where it comes from or how it was produced. And it is clear that if our food is dependent on companies like Cargill, Monsanto, Dupont, Nestle, Danone, Kraft, Carrefour, Mercadona our food safety is not guaranteed.

The impact of neoliberal policies in agriculture and food over the past decades has led us to a deeply unfair agro-food model, depredatory and generating hunger. According to data from the FAO, today, one in every six people in the world suffers from hunger, while food production has not stopped increasing since the mid-1960s, multiplying threefold, while the world's population, since then, has only doubled. Therefore, the food is there, but we are faced with a problem of access. If you cannot pay the price set (every day getting higher as a result of financial speculation on food commodities, among others) or do not have access to the means of production (land, water, seeds and so on that have been privatized), you do not eat.

What elements characterise this agricultural and food system? It is a model heavily dependent on oil, with intensive production and the use of large machines that need fossil fuel; with the use of chemical inputs (pesticides, insecticides and so on) prepared with oil; and food which travels thousands of miles before reaching our plates when it could be developed at local level.

We have a model which generates climate change. According to the organisation GRAIN, more than 55% of greenhouse gases are caused by this agro-industrial system, with a production model that deforests and kills off virgin woods and forests, which wears out soils, with food that travels long distances, with consequent conservation in large refrigerators and transport over long distances.

It is a model that involves the loss of agro-diversity. The FAO indicates that in the past hundred years 75 per cent of agricultural and livestock varieties have disappeared. The food known by our grandfathers and grandmothers, and even fathers and mothers, has very little to do with what we eat. In recent decades, there has been a growing homogeneity with regard to food consumption, with the loss of not only agro-diversity but also of cultural knowledge.

In addition, industrial agriculture dispenses with the peasantry and the farmer's knowledge. Currently, in the Spanish state only 5% of the active population is rural and agricultural income is only 55% of overall income. If they disappear, in whose hands is our food?

An ecological and social transformation

Before the impasse to which the current model of civilization has led, we sense more than ever the relevance of the lucid metaphor of Walter Benjamin who argued that humankind was heading like a runaway train towards the precipice and the role of those who strive to change the world is to pull the emergency brakes as the train approaches the cliff.

Faced with the global ecological crisis, which is intertwined with the economic and social crisis, there are two conflicting logics which are in contradiction. On the one hand, short-term profit and permanent electoral tactical manoeuvring, characteristic of capital and managerial politics, embodied by the majority of the world's governments. And, on the other, the long term logic of the defence of humanity, life and balance with nature, represented by the movement for climate justice. They represent two alternative destinations. For us, the choice is clear.

What does it mean to defend a perspective of social and ecological transformation of society and the economy? And what does it imply? On the one hand, retraining for workers from the environmentally unsustainable production sectors (arms industry, cars, and construction), maintaining employment rights and creating new jobs in economically sustainable sectors such as renewable energy and agro-ecology. It means a massive reduction in working hours, working fewer hours while maintaining wages, creating new jobs and promoting a more balanced sharing of domestic work and care between men and women.

It means banning layoffs at companies that are making a profit. It is scandalous that as Telefónica announced record profits of more than ten billion Euros in 2010 it also announced its intention of laying off 20% of its workforce in the state.

It involves a redistribution of wealth and income. Who has most should pay most. And combating tax fraud. Today it is estimated that in the Spanish state tax fraud amounts to 100 billion Euros per year, double the tax cuts that Zapatero wants to make with the austerity plan of 2010-2013. Instead of freezing pensions, cutting public sector wages, privatizing public services and so on, other tax policies could be followed.

Alternatives calling into question capitalist property relations. Defending the nationalization of the financial system and other key sectors such as energy. Banking should be a public service, aimed at meeting social needs.

It is necessary to reduce over-production and the consumption of material goods, especially in rich countries. If everyone consumes as we do here, we would need several planet Earths. It is necessary, therefore, to rethink our model of consumption and reduce unfair, redundant, unnecessary, anti-ecological and excessive consumption.

In fact, the logic of the capitalist system needs this compulsive consumption, selling goods that are produced on a large scale. On the one hand, it promotes a series of artificial needs. We believe that we need more to live better and be happier: the latest mobile telephone, a change of clothes each season.

And on the other hand, production is based on the mechanism of planned obsolescence: products are made to ensure that they have a short life and will deteriorate quickly so that new ones have to be bought: mobile phones stop working after three years, printers are programmed so that they will stop working. Cosima Dannoritzer's documentary "The Light Bulb Conspiracy" explains it perfectly.

Thinking about an anti-capitalist and anti-productivist strategy to transform society is important so as to incorporate the contributions of the indigenous movements such as the concept of "good living", which raise other relations between humanity and nature in harmony with the Pachamama, "mother earth". Demands that were raised strongly in the Assembly of Social Movements of the World Social Forum in Belen (Brazil) in January 2009 and in the People's Summit on Climate Change and Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba (Bolivia) in April 2010.

This is not, however, to fall into romanticism or idealizations of the indigenous movement, but to integrate their contributions and understand their proposals, seeking a critical dialogue between indigenous movement, environmentalism and socialist thought.

Be angry and organize

The starting point for confronting the social and ecological crisis is social resistance, organization and mobilization, because changes do not occur spontaneously from above but are the result of pressure and the fight in the street. It is necessary, therefore, to build another correlation of forces between capital and labour.

And the inability to force significant changes in the dominant policies is mainly explained by the weakness of the social response to the crisis. Because if there is a climate that anti-capitalists and environmentalists need to change it is precisely the social climate. In the social field, we definitely need some global warming.

Ultimately, what is at stake is a conservative solution to the crisis or a left, anti-capitalist, environmentalist, feminist and solidarity-based outcome. The reactions of workers in scenarios such as this may be dominated by fear and selfishness or by solidarity and anger against injustice. They can move towards progressive options or turn to reactionary alternatives. There is no automatic relation between distress and social mobilization, and even less, between mobilization and mobilization in the sense of solidarity.

We live in a paradoxical moment where the cumulative malaise is very broad, but at the same time there is a great resignation and discouragement. The difficulty is not convincing many people that the current model does not work, but rather convincing those who already share this diagnosis that is possible to change things. Many people are defeated before they start to fight. And this is the great victory of the capitalist system: making us believe that "there is no alternative". The conquest of our collective imagination.

The challenge ahead is transforming the social unrest into mobilization and collective action, and reconstructing a culture of mobilisation, solidarity and participation in collective affairs, in the workplace, in neighbourhoods, in study centres. And it is necessary to obtain concrete victories, to show the usefulness of mobilization, to build up forces and prepare new victories.

For a long time people have only experienced, in general, defeats and setbacks, and we need counter-examples to show that it is possible to change things. I believe that, precisely, the most important consequence of the revolutions in the Arab world, for the alternative movements in Europe, is that they demonstrate that mobilizing, fighting, organizing, taking to the streets, work, that the foundations of the current system are not so strong as they seem or as want us to believe and that when unrest turns into anger and anger into popular mobilization, the power of those at the bottom becomes unstoppable.

Environmentalism has traditionally also placed much emphasis on going beyond mobilization, promoting a change in values, transforming lives and daily habits and building alternative practices aimed, here and now, at “another world”.

From this point of view, individual action is important because it provides consistency regarding what we stand for, is demonstrative and puts the possibility of other daily practices on the agenda. Those who want to change the world should try to find a possible coherence between what we do and what we say. Although on the basis that absolute consistency in the capitalist system in which we live is impossible.

But we must also bear in mind that individual action is not sufficient, not enough. Sometimes you can believe that by changing our daily habits, one by one, we will change our society, and this is not the case. Individual action does not generate structural change. These will only be possible through collective action. It is necessary to break the myth that our individual actions, by themselves, can generate structural changes. On the other hand, the alternative social movements place much emphasis on building alternative non-capitalist islets to transform society in an anti-capitalist logic, by way of liberated spaces. A good example of these practices, among others, is the movement of agro-ecological consumer cooperatives and groups.

Their growth in the Spanish state this past decade has been very significant and there have been thousands of experiences throughout the country, with local consumer groups, who establish a direct relationship with a producer and/or local farmer and develop another model of production, distribution and consumption based on trust, proximity, peasant-based and ecological production.

In fact, Andalusia has been a pioneer with these experiences. We are talking about initiatives based on the demand for food sovereignty, regaining control over agricultural and food policies, the ability for us to decide what we eat rather than a few multinationals that control the food chain and put their own interests above collective needs.

Sometimes there may be a certain idealization of these experiences and the potentialities of these spaces and projects and it may seem that reinforcing these initiatives and enlarging them is enough to change the world. But this is not the case.

For agro-ecological consumer cooperatives and groups, if I want to consume organic products it is necessary that GMOs are banned because coexistence between the latter and conventional and organic agriculture is impossible. We need, therefore political changes which can only be obtained with the mobilization of the masses

Although it is clear that the construction of local alternatives, in everyday life, consumption,

alternative media, and so on, is something fundamental. And any social mobilization of the masses will have feet of clay if it is not supported by a dense network of associations and conferences, together with a powerful labour and neighbourhood movement.

But such local and daily alternatives cannot be to the detriment of the search for the mobilization and organization of the bulk of the workers and popular sectors. Apart from active minorities, social change will come from the collective action of the majority of the population. Changing the world is not the task of a few but is the business of many.

On the other hand, another urgent task is to promote the coordination of struggles, creating spaces of articulation and ensuring that they are not isolated. It must be borne in mind that neoliberal capitalism bases its strength in the fragmentation and dispersion of the whole of the oppressed and exploited. "Divide and rule" has been the great success of neoliberalism.

We live in an increasingly fragmented society: between natives and immigrants, unemployed people and workers with jobs, between precarious and stable employees. But where the system places walls, we must promote convergence between mobilizations and social struggles.

Another left from below

Although social resistance is the starting point to change things, by itself it is not enough. We need to articulate an alternative broad anti-capitalist policy linked to struggles and movements, because we do not want to resign ourselves to be a pressure group on those who rule.

With the current system, it is necessary to note the absolute inability and lack of political will on the hegemonic left to change society and combat the social and ecological crisis. The European social democratic parties have adapted, for some time, to the interests of big capital and have woven ties with private sectors. Political and corporate collusion and revolving doors are the order of the day. The number of ex-politicians occupying positions on the boards of directors of the main Spanish companies continues to increase.

Social democracy does not have its own agenda for a way out of the crisis, beyond the management of the interests of capital. And the bulk of the formations located to its left, as is the case with many Communist Parties or Green Parties, have become forces disconnected from struggles, led by "families", absolutely institutionalised and subordinated to social democracy. This does not mean they do not contain valuable people with another vision, but they are without the ability to make an impact. In fact, both the Communists and the Greens have become essentially electoral, institutional and media apparatuses, with a hollow social base and have abandoned a perspective of mobilization and social struggle.

The majority left, unfortunately, has lost any ambition to transform society from below and to the left. The conventional left-wing parties may have electoral credibility, receiving support as a lesser evil, but do not have political credibility as useful tools to change this world. The case of the European Greens is an example of this evolution. They have grown electorally with the support of the middle classes tired of social democracy, but they are little more than an electoral umbrella.

In the German case, the Greens, from their emergence at the beginning of the 1980s, went, in a very short time, from embodying an anti-systemic and radical alternative to being a force in the management of government and correction of the system, from having a pacifist and anti-militarist perspective to defending the bombing of Kosovo in 1999.

One of the best examples of institutionalization and abandonment of a real prospect of transformation by European Greens is now in Iceland, where, on April 9th and for the second time, the citizens rejected in a referendum the agreement that the Icelandic government, formed by the Social Democrats and the Greens, had signed with European financiers. The proposal was to pay \$5,200 million to British and Dutch banking insurers. The Icelandic people said "no". Because this is not the way to combat the ecological and social crisis that we face.

Against this "left" we must build another credible left as a useful tool to combat neo-liberalism and the transformation of society. A left that is based on a strategic perspective of a break with the logic of capital, commitment to the social struggles and a politics not conceived as a profession. Politics cannot be the monopoly of a caste of professional politicians that make it a *modus vivendi*.

This other left cannot have its centre of gravity as working in the institutions; its axis has to be on the street, in mobilization and in the production of oppositional social and cultural proposals. Here is where the left must have its line of action. Because you cannot fight neoliberalism and capitalism and at the same time manage their policies.

This does not mean that it is not necessary to work in institutions or be present in electoral contests. We must participate in them to challenge the monopoly of political representation of the parties which have it. And having people within institutions (in municipalities, in Parliament and so on) is useful as a loudspeaker for struggles, ideas and alternative proposals, as a sounding board. It is to use public office in the service of mobilization.

We need a left independent from the logic of the institutions, that does not have financial or ideological ties. The major political and trade union organizations are now linked to institutions and banks. And often they depend materially on these to survive.

The left that we need must maintain its independence with respect to the social liberal governments. Governmental collaboration with social democracy does not lead to progress in the construction of another left, but quite the contrary, it leads to retreat. We have many examples that demonstrate the failure of the governments of the plural left. In France, for example, with the Jospin government formed by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens, in 1997, which was one of the governments that privatized most in the country's recent history. Or in Italy, the government of Romano Prodi and Rifondazione Communist which, after a few years of existence, disillusioned its social base so much that Berlusconi came back to power.

In Catalonia, the passage of Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV) to the government of the Generalitat, with the PSC and ERC, is the best example of how the left to be built cannot be placed in a subordinate logic to social democracy. The overall balance of management, beyond some concrete measures, has nothing to do with the transformation of society but just the opposite. The justification of environmentalism that ICV made in order to govern with the PSC was a discourse influenced by the left, but the reality is different: far from dragging the Socialist Party to the left, the ICV has been dragged to the right and the practice of policies contrary to its program.

In the case of the ICV, this has become very visible at a triple level. At the social and economic level, looking the other way in relation to business relocation and privatizing, for example, parks and gardens in Barcelona. In the environmental field, giving in to the construction of large-scale infrastructure like the Very High Tension electricity link, the Quart Cinturo, and others. And in the field of democratic rights, with the lamentable assumption of the Ministry of Interior and head of the Mossos de Esquadra [the Catalan police force] responsible for serious episodes of repression in the last term of government.

It is necessary, therefore, to construct an alternative that breaks the monopoly of political representation held by the traditional parties. There are no shortcuts to build this other left, which will necessarily be the fruit of the confluence between various people and organizations and the result of the participation of many activists in unorganized social movements who are fighting on various fronts.

But there is still a great mistrust and scepticism towards political activity by the majority of left-wing activists, as a result of the balance sheet of the failed experiences of the twentieth century. Although in the specific political context, the crisis, the difficulties of social resistance will gradually raise the need to build a political alternative not limited to social activity.

The need to build an alternative is the debate that we have to place in the political, social and cultural life of the left in the Spanish state. And the alternative that we have to build is an alternative of a sharp break, of struggle, not a political project that is intended to manage what exists.

Often, for various left currents, it has been about trying to reconcile institutional logic and the logic of transformation: defending the idea of “party of struggle and party of government”, but practical experience has shown that this is completely contradictory and ends up as a left take on institutional drift and management.

Today left-wing policies mean facing the logic of capital, a logic that does not allow even minor reforms. It means working to open a breach in the political system, building up the forces and generating the conditions to achieve a social majority in favour of a change of model.

The objective of the left must be taking power “without being taken by power”, without being trapped by the latter, as Olivier Bensancenot has put it. Working to organize resistance, mobilize society, advance anti-capitalist ideas and build an alternative project that someday could be hegemonic and carry out a politics of real transformation.

In conclusion. The crisis of modern civilization puts us before great challenges. We must recognize that we have no magic recipes or miracle potions to change the system, as the French philosopher Daniel Bensaïd put it, “Let us not deceive ourselves, nobody knows how to change the world”. But we have some clues on how to do it and some working hypotheses: beginning with indignation, then rebellion and collective action.

And in this uncertain journey of changing the world, the works of people such as José Saramago, are, without doubt, a good reference to guide us and ensure we do not get lost along the way.

Esther Vivas

P.S.

* Speech at a conference to commemorate José Saramago at the University of Granada, 28 April 2011. Published in International Viewpoint, August 2011.

* Esther Vivas is a member of the Centre for Studies on Social Movements (CEMS) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. She is author of the book in Spanish “Stand Up against external debt” and co-coordinator of the books also in Spanish “Supermarkets, No Thanks” and “Where is Fair Trade headed?”. She is also a member of the editorial board of Viento Sur.

+info: <http://esthervivas.wordpress.com/english>