

The ecosocialism debate: a response to Daniel Tanuro - “We need much more discussion in the FI on all aspects of the ecological crisis”

Friday 23 October 2015, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 23 October 2015).

Contents

- [The debate on the role of \(...\)](#)
- [A transitional approach](#)

I very much welcome Daniel Tanuro’s recently posted article on the IV site on climate change and ecology entitled “Confronted by the ecological emergency: project of society, programme, strategy”. It is based on presentation he made at the FI international youth camp in Belgium in August of this year.

It starts by highlighting the frightening new scientific evidence that has been produced by American glaciologists on the destabilisation of the Antarctic ice sheet (which is by far the biggest on earth) and the huge rise in the sea level that will inevitably result from this.

It goes on to address some of the issues that are the subject of debate, both inside and outside of the FI, amongst ecosocialists and left ecologists.

The first thing to welcome (in this regard) is the strong position the text takes on the biodiversity crisis. It not only recognises the scale of this crisis but makes it central to its analysis. It and makes reference to the concept of the sixth great extinction (of species) and argues (rightly) that we are experiencing the most catastrophic collapse of biodiversity since the demise of the dinosaurs sixty million years ago.

Most Marxist ecologists, including Daniel Tanuro, have long failed, in my view, to give the biodiversity crisis the centrality it deserves. [\[1\]](#).

I also welcome what Tanuro says about the rising human population of the planet—which has been a taboo subject amongst Marxist ecologists for far too long. He accepts that the rising global human population is indeed an environmental problem and argues that we should aim to stabilise it at the current 7bn—which he calls the ‘demographic transition’. The global population is currently rising by 80,000,000 a year and shows no sign of declining.

He links it to the melting ice sheets and argues that the massive loss of arable and habitable land that will be lost to the rising sea level by the end of the century is incompatible with the projected increase in the human population to 9bn during that time scale (according to UN figures).

He is rightly rejects all authoritarian ‘solutions’ to the rising global population whatever form they take. He argues that the ‘demographic transition’ depends fundamentally on two elements: ‘the right

of women to control their own fertility (in particular the right to free abortion in safe conditions) and a social security worthy of the name (in particular a pension system that enables older people to live decently without the help of numerous children).’ I agree 100% with this. I would add to that lifting impoverished women out of poverty and giving them access to education.

Fortunately the reactionaries and the authoritarians are far from the only voices in the population debate. There is a major body of opinion around the empowerment of women approach that can be related to and built on. For example the UN Cairo 1994 conference on population which adopted a Programme of Action which called on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, by 2015 or sooner.

He argues, rightly, that stabilising the global human population is not a solution to all the problems of the environment. Of course it is not. I don’t accept, however, as he argues, that population stabilisation need be such a slow process or that it would have no positive role to play in the short to medium term.

Any reduction in the current rate of population increase would make a significant contribution on a range of environmental fronts. Some things, like lifting the impoverished women of the global South out of poverty, are contingent on an ongoing battle against globalised capitalism. Other things like providing women with reproductive services—based on a woman’s right to choose—can be done far more quickly given the political will.

Even raising basic awareness of the effects of rising population on the environment, and on peoples lives, can make a difference if it can become a factor for consideration when women make decisions on family size.

The debate on the role of capitalism

I agree with the section of the text that deals with the absurdity of the capitalist mode of production and its resulting productivism. It puts it this way:

‘Capitalism is therefore by its essence productivist. It produces ever more commodities, which means appropriating and pillaging ever more natural resources, increasingly exploiting the labour force (either directly in production or indirectly in services and in the reproduction of the labour force), and increasingly destroying knowledge and logical alternatives to its own bulimic “logic”’.

I don’t agree, however, when it goes on to reject the existence of an ‘ecological crisis’. It puts it this way:

‘The conclusion is glaringly obvious: it is not nature that is in crisis, it is capitalist society. We have arrived at a stage where the absurdity of this mode of production is seriously perturbing the relationship between humanity and the nature to which it belongs, to the point of posing a mortal threat to much of the human race. That is why I do not like the expression “ecological crisis”’.

This makes no sense. Capitalism is indeed the most environmentally destructive system of society that the human species has produced, with the possible/probable exception of Stalinism. The environmental crisis, however, cannot be reduced to the role of capitalism in this way. This is a far too narrow and restrictive view of the ecological crisis.

The fact is that the (anthropogenic) ecological crisis existed long before capitalism and will not, in my view, be resolved simply by its removal. This for me is where the concept of ecosocialism

becomes so important.

A transitional approach

Despite this (error in my view) the text does not go on to endorse (as might seem logical) the dominant narrative on the ecological left that the answer to the ecological crisis is socialism—one solution revolution as I would call it.

(If we have only a few decades to prevent an ecological disaster then socialist revolution on a world scale as an answer is out of kilter with reality. There is not (even) any model of socialism, advocated by understood by any significant section of the left, that would be capable of building a sustainable socialist society and tackling the ongoing ecological crisis that would continue to after capitalism was gone.)

Tanuro puts it this way: 'In my opinion, the task of revolutionaries in this context is not to stay on the side of the road distributing leaflets calling for a socialist response. These leaflets are certainly useful, but our task is also to build the mass movement and orient it towards anti-capitalist solutions.'

The text closely integrates the struggle against climate change and in defence of the environment into the class struggle as a whole and sees it as a part of an ongoing struggle for Socialism and the overthrow of capitalism. I won't rehearse it all here but the text says the following:

'The struggle that we must wage for the environment is a class struggle, an anti-capitalist struggle that encompasses virtually all other struggles and that has the potential to bring them all together. A struggle whose outcome will decide the choice between a humanity worthy of the name - that takes loving care of itself and of the nature to which it belongs - or the barbaric chaos of social and environmental destruction.'

The reference to nature here is crucial. We have to see ourselves (humanity) as a part of nature and not as its exploiter or its destroyer. This is what defines our responsibilities when it comes to the defence of the environment in the broadest sense. This is what ecosocialism is first and foremost about.

This, the text argues, means winning the argument over the seriousness of the situation. Rejecting the capitalist conception of growth, and the productivism that results from this, and fighting for a full transition to a carbon free energy system. It means shorter work time and a lower intensity of work and an emphasis on the quality of life rather the quantity of commodities. It puts it this way:

'Concerning the programme, I would say that those who think that the ecological question risks diverting us from anti-capitalist responses with which to counter austerity are seriously mistaken. The opposite is true: in reality, the urgency and the gravity of the environmental crisis give strong legitimacy to an extremely radical, revolutionary programme, whose keystone is the double expropriation/socialization of energy and of the financial sector, without compensation or buyback and under workers' control.'

It goes on: 'We have to oppose 'all the major investment projects in the service of the fossil industry: the new airports, new pipelines, new motorways, new drilling, new mines, the new madness of shale gas, the new fads of geo-engineers who dream of providing Earth with a thermostat ... of which they would have control.'

All this takes the discussion forwards and I agree with it. We need, however, much more discussion in the FI on all aspects of the ecological crisis from its location in the revolutionary struggle and the kind of socialism we are talking about to the tactical questions of our day to day actively to defend the environment and oppose climate change in the here and now whilst capitalism still exists.

Let's find a way of having it.

Alan Thornett, 21.10.15

P.S.

* "The ecosocialism debate: a response to Daniel Tanuro":
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4262>

Footnotes

[1] See Thornett's article arguing this—ESSF (article 36141), [The biodiversity crisis and the environmentalist left - "Often the biodiversity crisis is either left out or underestimated"](#).