

Fossil fuel, climate and anti-capitalism

Sunday 22 April 2007, by [TANURO Daniel](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2007).

Belgian environmentalist, Daniel Tanuro, argues that the dependence on the market proposed by the Stern Report as a solution to climate change can only lead to a cul-de-sac. To escape without a blood bath or an ecological disaster, there is only one way: to break with the logic of the market.

Contents

- [‘The largest and broadest \(...\)’](#)
- [Superprofits at the heart \(...\)’](#)
- [The alternative is anti-capitalism](#)

Tobacco causes cancer, so what would we say to a doctor who, discovering a lung tumour in a patient, prescribed cigarettes? We would call him a charlatan, or an assassin. Harm is not cured by harm, but by attacking it.

The same logic applies to the battle for the climate. Climate change ‘the largest and broadest market failure ever seen’, is ‘a defeat for the market without precedent’, according to the *Stern Report*. [1] To believe that a phenomenon resulting from the market can be combated by the extension of the market is absurd. But this is what Stern proposes. The European Commission and all the governments follow in his footsteps: more of the market, more growth, more globalisation. But really we must take the opposite path: less market, more public spending; less competition, more collaboration; less free enterprise, more planning; less globalisation more local production. A system based on fulfilling real human needs does not need to produce ever more goods.

‘The largest and broadest market failure ever seen’

Why is the market economy responsible for global warming? Stern does not answer this question. He cannot do so because the answer lies in the very foundations of capitalism, and not in one or another minor imperfection.

The market economy is responsible for global warming because it is based on competition and accumulation. Decisions on production are not taken in relation to human needs or ecology, but on grounds of profit. Useless or harmful things are made solely to satisfy the greed of shareholders. Costly publicity campaigns are used to sell the products. Blind competition leads to overproduction, with many products being discarded. Objects are created for rapid consumption, or to consume too much energy. Things are made in poor countries, then transported to the rich. In brief: the waste of resources is inherent in the market economy. It is anchored in the irrepressible force which pushes each owner of capital to replace workers with machines, so as to cash in on a ‘technological profit’, and because of the tendency of the system to compensate for the decline in the rate of profit – which results from the multiplication of machines – not only by an exploitation of work, but also by the (over)production of goods, the conquest of new markets and the invention of new needs.

But that is not all. The most important cause of global warming is the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas). But the use of fossil fuels is itself the result of the logic of profit. We have known since 1839 that natural light generates electricity when it meets certain materials ('the photovoltaic effect'). If scientific research had been primarily oriented towards the exploitation of solar energy, the atmosphere today would not be saturated with carbon. So, why was this path not taken? Because the capitalist energy system was already in place, based on the private ownership of resources and on the extreme centralisation of energy production. In this system, photovoltaic energy did not fit very well. For no-one can own solar rays, which are unlimited and diffuse; on the other hand one can own the limited stocks of coal, oil and gas....and accumulate superprofits as well as profits.

Superprofits at the heart of the capitalist energy system

Oil, coal, gas and wood have one thing in common –they represent the accumulated solar energy which is also a stockpile and transportable. Since the 14th century in Europe, the newly born bourgeoisie and the aristocracy appropriated the forests, which had previously been for the common good. Ever since then, wood has been a commodity and the control of energy resources a decisive stake in class domination. If we consider this both from the point of view of energy and of society, we can say that the monopoly of the ownership of the land allowed the landlord class to sell – free – solar energy, in the form of wood, gaining not only an average profit, but also superprofits in the form of income from the land.

This tendency was only reinforced with the appearance of the industrial bourgeoisie, who replaced 'the solar energy of wood' with 'fossil solar energy' (coal at first, then oil and gas). A brief look back at the history of energy technologies, is enough to show that the centralisation of capital, the monopoly of resources and the centralisation of power accompanied the shift from wood to coal, then from coal to electricity power stations, thence to nuclear power stations. Each time maintaining the precious energy superprofits.

Let us look at the case of oil. The sale of refined petroleum products brings in about 2000 million Euros a year. The costs is barely E500 million. The profit and oil income – E1500 million a year on a world scale – is pocketed by a small number of multinationals and (except for Venezuela) by the superrich in power in the countries of production. [2] Oil is their goose that lays the golden eggs. They want her to continue laying for as long as possible. This desire is shared by the dependent sectors: cars, naval construction, aeronautics, petrochemicals...One hardly needs to point out that these sectors have a formidable power and political influence. This is why we do not hear of those scientists who have warned against the danger of global warming for more than thirty years. This is why the money in the energy research and development budgets for renewables in the member states of the International Energy Agency (IEA) has decreased since the first oil crisis (7.7% from 1986-2002 compared to 8.4% from 1974-1986!). This is why nuclear fission – and not renewables – has carved out the lion's share of these budgets (47.3%), followed by conversion technologies of fossil fuels. [3] Why? To maintain profits, superprofits, political power and social control flowing from centralised energy. To search anywhere else is to look in vain.

It is not only that the market is responsible for the climate mess, but in addition it does everything to hold back the necessary measures. When they are taken, it tries to diminish them. Or to deform them to such a point that they barely merit the phrase 'the first step in the right direction'. Look at the Kyoto Protocol: it is so full of 'flexible mechanisms' that at best it would reduce the global emissions of the industrialised countries by 1.7% by 2012. [4] Whereas they should be reduced by 70% from now until 2050...on a world scale!

The alternative is anti-capitalist and solar

To reduce emissions by 70% between now and 2050 on a world scale! Is this possible in such a short time? Yes! It is difficult, but the climate can still be saved in its essentials. Radiation from the sun is 8000 times the world consumption of energy. Existing technologies would allow us to use a thousandth: eight times the actual need of humanity. Scientific research will build on this potential in the years ahead (if we give them the means to do so). Certainly economies will have to be made, waste will have to be abolished – this concerns each of us, our habits, etc. But we are not condemned to choose between the climate and wellbeing, or between the climate and the development of the countries of the South, or between the climate and heaps of radioactive waste that will remain dangerous for tens of thousands of years! A global plan, democratically developed and answering humanity's needs would allow us to face the danger. There is an alternative, anticapitalist and...solar.

In the end capitalism will have to do something to stabilise the situation, must leave behind the logic of Kyoto's 'small steps'. The moment of this decision is fast approaching, under the onslaught of the media. But the market will 'save' the climate in its own way, just as it destroys it: on the back of the workers and the oppressed. Its function is profit not need. This will happen in two periods. At first, the system will wait as long as possible, so that the 'rescue' of the climate becomes an income generating activity, so that the market in clean technologies (and nuclear ones) is ripe (too bad for those who are already suffering from climate change but do not represent a solvent financial market). Then, when the rescue of what remains of our climate becomes an income for shareholders, we will be made to pay for the financing and for the dismantling of social protection (too bad for those who do not have the means to help themselves).

The Stern Report is clear in this respect. To save the climate in the best way possible means doing everything to keep the rise in temperature down to below 2°C from a baseline of 1780. Concretely, this implies that the emissions reach a peak in ten years then reduce by 5% a year. Stern estimates the cost of this scenario to be \$1200 billion a year and finds it too expensive. So he argues for another solution: peak emission in 20 years, then a reduction of between 1% and 3% a year. This means a more than 50% chance of passing the 2°C rise in temperature ... but will cost much less. Here then is the capitalist answer for 'saving' the climate! From here to 2080, 200 million people will have to flee the rising oceans and global warming will add three billion men, women and children to the list of those who suffer already from a lack of water. It needs \$1200 billion to avoid these catastrophes ... but capitalism finds it too expensive! To remind you: as well as the superprofits from oil that are even higher, military budgets swallow up \$1037 billion every year. [5]

In its race for profits and superprofits, capitalism has developed an energy system based on fossil fuels and the exploitation of human labour. As a result we are today in a veritable energy and environmental cul de sac, at a global level. To escape without a blood bath or an ecological disaster, there is only one way: to break with the logic of the market, (re)order energy as a common good, turn our backs on the technologies of the sorcerer's apprentice which, in imitation of the atom, respond to the needs of capitalist accumulation, not to the needs of the inhabitants of this planet. In this sense the left must participate in the unitary mobilisations for the climate

Notes

1. Report drawn up by Sir Nicholas Stern at the request of the British Government, October 2006.
2. Jean-Marie Chevalier, *Les grandes batailles de l'énergie*, Gallimard, 2004.
3. AIE 2004.

4. Agence Europeenne de l'Environnement, *report No.8/2005*, Page 9.

5. Figures 2004 from SIPRI, Stockholm.

P.S.

* To be published in "Socialist Outlook" Nr 12.