

Will Capitalism Survive Climate Change?

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THERE is now a solid consensus in the scientific community that if the change in global mean temperature in the twenty-first century exceeds 2.4 degrees Celsius, changes in the planet's climate will be large-scale, irreversible, and disastrous. Moreover, the window of opportunity for action that will make a difference is narrow — that is, the next 10 to 15 years.

Throughout the North, however, there is strong resistance to changing the systems of consumption and production that have created the problem in the first place and a preference for “techno-fixes,” such as “clean” coal, carbon sequestration and storage, industrial-scale biofuels, and nuclear energy.

Globally, transnational corporations and other private actors resist government-imposed measures such as mandatory caps, preferring to use market mechanisms like the buying and selling of “carbon credits,” which critics says simply amounts to a license for corporate polluters to keep on polluting.

In the South, there is little willingness on the part of Southern elites to depart from the high-growth, high-consumption model inherited from the North, and a self-interested conviction that the North must first adjust and bear the brunt of adjustment before the South takes any serious step towards limiting its greenhouse gas emissions.

Contours of the Challenge

In the climate change discussions, the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” is recognized by all parties, meaning that the global North must shoulder the brunt of the adjustment to the climate crisis since it is the one whose economic trajectory has brought it about. It is also recognized that the global response should not compromise the right to develop of the countries of the global South

The devil, however, is in the detail. As Martin Khor of Third World Network has pointed out, the global reduction of 80 per cent in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2050 that many now recognize as a necessary, will have to translate into reductions of at least 150 to 200 per cent on the part of the global North if the two principles — “common but differentiated responsibility” and recognition of the right to development of the countries of the South — are to be followed. But are the governments and people of the North prepared to make such commitments?

Psychologically and politically, it is doubtful that the North at this point has what it takes to meet the problem head-on. The prevailing assumption is that the affluent societies can take on commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions but still grow and enjoy their high standards of living if they shift to non-fossil fuel energy sources. Moreover, how the mandatory cuts agreed multilaterally

by governments get implemented within the country must be market-based, that is, on the trading of emission permits. The subtext is: techno-fixes and the carbon market will make the transition relatively painless and — why not? — profitable, too.

There is, however, a growing realization that many of these technologies are decades away from viable use and that, in the short and medium term, relying on a shift in energy dependence to non-fossil fuel alternatives will not be able to support current rates of economic growth. Also, it is increasingly evident that the trade-off for more cropland being devoted to biofuel production is less land to grow food and greater food insecurity globally.

It is rapidly becoming clear that the dominant paradigm of economic growth is one of the most significant obstacles to a serious global effort to deal with climate change. But this destabilizing, fundamentalist growth-consumption paradigm is itself more effect rather than cause.

The central problem, it is becoming increasingly clear, is a mode of production whose main dynamic is the transformation of living nature into dead commodities, creating tremendous waste in the process. The driver of this process is consumption - or more appropriately overconsumption - and the motivation is profit or capital accumulation: Capitalism, in short.

It has been the generalization of this mode of production in the North and its spread from the North to the South over the last 300 years that has caused the accelerated burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil and rapid deforestation, two of the key man-made processes behind global warming.

The South's Dilemma

One way of viewing global warming is to see it as a key manifestation of the latest stage of a wrenching historical process: the privatization of the global commons by capital. The climate crisis must thus be seen as the expropriation by the advanced capitalist societies of the ecological space of less developed or marginalized societies.

This leads us to the dilemma of the South: Before the full extent of the ecological destabilization brought about by capitalism, it was expected that the South would simply follow the “stages of growth” of the North. Now it is impossible to do so without bringing about ecological Armageddon. Already, China is on track to overtake the US as the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, and yet the elite of China as well as those of India and other rapidly developing countries are intent on reproducing the American-type overconsumption-driven capitalism.

Thus, for the South, the implications of an effective global response to global warming include not just the inclusion of some countries in a regime of mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, although this is critical: in the current round of climate negotiations, for instance, China, can no longer opt out of a mandatory regime on the ground that it is a developing country.

Nor can the challenge to most of the other developing countries be limited to that of getting the North to transfer technology to mitigate global warming and provide funds to assist them in adapting to it, as many of them appeared to think during the Bali negotiations.

These steps are important, but they should be seen as but the initial steps in a broader, global reorientation of the paradigm for achieving economic well being. While the adjustment will need to be much, much greater and faster in the North, the adjustment for the South will essentially be the same: a break with the high-growth, high-consumption model in favor of another model of achieving the common welfare

In contrast to the Northern elites' strategy of trying to decouple growth from energy use, a progressive comprehensive climate strategy in both the North and the South must be to reduce growth and energy use while raising the quality of life of the broad masses of people. Among other things, this will mean placing economic justice and equality at the center of the new paradigm.

The transition must be one not only from a fossil-fuel based economy but also from an overconsumption-driven economy. The end-goal must be adoption of a low-consumption, low-growth, high-equity development model that results in an improvement in people's welfare, a better quality of life for all, and greater democratic control of production.

It is unlikely that the elites of the North and the South will agree to such a comprehensive response. The farthest they are likely to go is for techno-fixes and a market-based cap-and-trade system. Growth will be sacrosanct, as will the system of global capitalism.

Yet, confronted with the Apocalypse, humanity cannot self-destruct. It may be a difficult road, but we can be sure that the vast majority will not commit social and ecological suicide to enable the minority to preserve their privileges. However it is achieved, a thorough reorganization of production, consumption, and distribution will be the end result of humanity's response to the climate emergency and the broader environmental crisis.

Threat and Opportunity

In this regard, climate change is both a threat and an opportunity to bring about the long postponed social and economic reforms that had been derailed or sabotaged in previous eras by elites seeking to preserve or increase their privileges. The difference is that today the very existence of humanity and the planet depend on the institutionalization of economic systems based not on feudal rent extraction or capital accumulation or class exploitation but on justice and equality.

The question is often asked these days if humanity will be able to get its act together to formulate an effective response to climate change. Though there is no certainty in a world filled with contingency, I am hopeful that it will. In the social and economic system that will be collectively crafted, I anticipate that there will be room for the market. However, the more interesting question is: will it have room for capitalism? Will capitalism as a system of production, consumption, and distribution survive the challenge of coming up with an effective solution to the climate crisis?

P.S.

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