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Fossil fuels and timescales

# Climate Change - a contribution to the debate

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## **Description:**

Michael Lowy comments on important issues facing environmental campaigners, in the light of an important document authored by Daniel Tanuro.

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**Daniel Tanuro's report on climate change** [1] is one of the most important documents produced by our movement in recent years. It is an invaluable contribution to the political arming of revolutionary Marxists and to making them capable of facing up to the challenges of the 21st century.



The rainforest burns

The notes which follow are divided into two parts: 1) some criticisms and reservations on certain points, conceived as a kind of amendment to the document; 2) some remarks on ecosocialism, starting from questions that are suggested but not developed in the report (which could not, obviously, cover everything without becoming too long). So this is simply a contribution to the debate.

## I. Critical comments

1. It seems to me that the formula "2100" or "the end of the century" [2] must be replaced by "over the next few decades".

The most recent forecasts of scientists - not yet taken on board by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which, as the report indicates, always gets there late - envisage large-scale disasters over the next few decades if we continue with "business as usual". That has obvious political consequences: who is going to worry about what will happen in 2100? Admittedly, certain philosophers - such as Hans Jonas - have raised the question of "our duties towards the generations not yet born", but that does not interest many people. The question is very different when it concerns our own generation...

That also applies to the formula "quasi-total abandonment of the use of fossil fuels, to be effected in less than a century": to be replaced by "over the next few decades".

2. Carbon capture: the report mentions the limited character of storage capacities, but it seems to consider it as an "acceptable transitional measure" [3].

I think that it is necessary to be more reserved on this subject. The process is far from being developed, there are very few convincing examples, we do not yet have real security guarantees (the assurance that CO<sub>2</sub> will not escape again into the atmosphere). Moreover, on the pretext of a future "clean coal", we continue to use coal-fired power stations and to build new ones, which is, according to James Hansen, the recipe for a disaster in the near future. I

think that we must associate ourselves with what Hansen proposes: while waiting for the technique of carbon capture to be really established - in ten years? - it is necessary to stop building coal-fired power stations and gradually abolish the existing ones.

3. The movement against climate change must demand that governments respect "the most careful conclusions of the IPCC" [4].

This formula is too vague: what does "careful" mean? It is better to speak about the higher range of the proposals of the IPCC, i.e. 40 per cent between now and 2020 and 85 per cent between now and 2050. It is necessary to avoid the formula, which appears sometimes in the report, "reduction of between 25 and 40 per cent" between now and 2020. An appeal of ecological NGOs (Greenpeace, etc.) to Sarkozy speaks of a minimum of 40 per cent between now and 2020. We cannot demand less! Personally, I think that 40 per cent is too little and that it should be strongly suggested that it is a minimum, in reality very insufficient... The same thing applies to 2050: we should no longer write "reduction of between 50 and 85 per cent", but immediately insist on the higher level: 85 per cent.

4. Marx's error: according to the report, he "did not understand that the transition from wood to coal meant the abandonment of a renewable energy of flux in favour of an exhaustible energy of stock". First of all, I have some reservations about the term "renewable" being applied to wood used as a source of energy: that could quickly lead to the destruction of the last forests! As for fossil energies: admittedly, they are "exhaustible", but this argument seems to me to be out of date. There is still coal for 200 years and well before that, global warming will have caused a catastrophe without precedent.

The error of Marx and especially of Engels (cf. Antiduhring) was to believe that the revolution must simply "suppress the relations of production which have become obstacles (or chains) preventing the free development of the productive forces created by capitalism", as if these forces were neutral. It seems to me that we could take as a starting point the observations made by Marx about the Paris Commune: the workers cannot take possession of the capitalist state apparatus and put it at their service.

They are forced "to smash it" and to replace it by a form of political power that is radically different, democratic and non-state. The same idea applies, mutatis-mutandis, to the productive apparatus, which far from being "neutral" carries in its structure the stamp of a development which favours the accumulation of capital and the unlimited expansion of the market, thus leading to ecological catastrophe.

5. According to the report, we will be able to really begin the enormous changes necessary "only after the victory of the socialist revolution on a world level". It seems to me that, according to the logic of the permanent revolution, it is necessary to begin the changes that are necessary on the level of one or several countries, knowing that we will be able to complete the process only on the scale of the entire planet.

6. The draft says this about the rise in ocean levels: "the vast majority of the hundreds of millions of human beings threatened by the rise in the level of the oceans live in China (30 million), India (30 million), Bangladesh (15-20 million)..." etc. I do not question these figures, but I ask myself the following question: won't the sea level also go up in the seaboard cities of the West, i.e. in Amsterdam, Venice, Antwerp, Copenhagen, New York, etc? This is a question which has a political dimension: it is fine to ask for solidarity from the inhabitants of the countries of the North with the suffering of Bangladesh, but we should show them that they are threatened with the same dangers.

## II. On ecosocialism: a contribution to the debate

The ecosocialist project implies the establishment of democratic planning of the economy which takes into account

the preservation of the environment and, in particular, prevents a catastrophic disruption of the climate. It is thanks to such planning that we will be able to make a revolution in the energy system, leading to the replacement of the current resources (especially fossil energy), which are responsible for climate change and the poisoning of the environment, by renewable energy resources: water, wind and sun.

The necessary prerequisite for this democratic and ecological planning is public control of the means of production: decision-making on matters of public interest concerning technological investment and change must be removed from the banks and the capitalist companies, if we want these decisions to serve the common good of society and the safeguarding of the environment.

The whole of society will be free to democratically choose what kinds of production should be prioritised - according to social and ecological criteria - and the level of the resources which must be invested in alternative energies, in education, health and culture. The prices of the goods themselves would no longer be determined by the laws of supply and demand, but would as far as possible be fixed according to social, political and ecological criteria. This planning will have among its objectives the guarantee of full employment, thanks to the reduction of the working day. This condition is essential not only to fulfil the requirements of social justice, but also to make sure of the support of the working class, without which the process of structural ecological transformation of the productive forces cannot be carried out.

Far from being "despotic" as such, democratic planning is the exercise of the freedom of decision of the whole of society. This is a necessary exercise for society to free itself from the alienating and reifying "economic laws" and "iron cages" within capitalist and bureaucratic structures. Democratic planning, associated with the reduction of working time, would be a considerable progress of humanity towards what Marx called "the realm of freedom": the increase in free time is in fact a condition for the participation of workers in democratic discussion and the running of the economy and society.

The kind of system of democratic planning that is envisaged by ecosocialists relates to the principal economic choices - in particular those concerning the dangers of global warming - and not the administration of local restaurants, grocery shops, bakeries, small stores and artisanal enterprises and services. In the same way, it is important to stress that planning is not in contradiction with the self-management of workers in their units of production. Whereas the decision to transform, for example, a car factory into a unit for the production of engines for wind farms would be taken by the whole of society, the organization and the internal functioning of the factory would be managed democratically by the workers themselves.

We have had lengthy discussions about the "centralized" or "decentralized" character of planning, but the important thing remains the democratic control of the plan on all levels, local, regional, national, continental and, let us hope, planetary, since ecological themes such as global warming are issues that concern the whole world and can only be dealt with on this level. This proposal could be called "global democratic planning". It has nothing to do with what is generally designated as "central planning", because the economic and social decisions are not made by an unspecified "centre" but democratically decided by the populations concerned.

Ecosocialist planning must be based on democratic and pluralist debate, at every level of decision. Organized in the form of parties, platforms or any other kind of political movement, the delegates of the planning organizations would be elected and the various proposals would be presented to all those whom they concern. In other words, representative democracy must be enriched - and improved - by the direct democracy which makes it possible for people to directly choose - at the local, national and, finally, international level - between various proposals. The whole population would then discuss questions such as free public transport, a special tax paid by car owners to subsidize public transport, the subsidizing of solar energy, the reduction of working time to 30, 25 or even fewer hours a week, even if that involves a reduction of production. The democratic character of planning does not make it

incompatible with the participation of experts whose role is not to decide, but to present their arguments - often different, even opposing - during the democratic process of decision-making.

A question arises: what guarantee do we have that people will make the right choices, those which protect the environment, even if the price to be paid is to change some of their consumption habits? Such a "guarantee" does not exist, only the reasonable prospect that the rationality of democratic decisions will triumph once the fetishism of consumer goods has been abolished. It is certain that people will make mistakes by making bad choices, but don't the experts themselves make mistakes? It is impossible to conceive of the construction of a new society without the majority of people attaining a high level of socialist and ecological consciousness as a result of their struggles, their self-education and their social experience.

Some ecologists consider that the only alternative to productivism is to stop growth as a whole, or to replace it by negative growth - called in France "decreasing". To do this, it would be necessary to drastically reduce the excessive level of consumption of the population and to give up individual houses, central heating and washing machines, among other things, in order to lower the consumption of energy by half. The "decreasers" have the merit of having put forward a radical critique of productivism and consumerism. But the concept of "decreasing" is related to a purely quantitative conception of "growth" and of the development the productive forces. It would be better to think about a qualitative transformation of development. That means two different but complementary approaches:

1. Not only the reduction but the suppression of entire economic sectors, in order to put a stop to the monstrous waste of resources which is caused by capitalism - a system based on the large-scale production of useless and/or harmful products. The arms industry is a good example, as are all these "products" manufactured in the capitalist system (with their programmed obsolescence) which have no other use than to create profits for the big companies. The question is not "excessive consumption" in the abstract, but rather the type of consumption which is dominant at present, and whose principal characteristics are: conspicuous consumption, massive waste, obsessive accumulation of goods and the compulsive acquisition of pseudo innovations imposed by "fashion". A new society would direct production towards the satisfaction of genuine needs, starting with those that we could describe as "biblical" - water, food, clothing and housing - but including essential services: health, education, culture and transport. We could thus speak about "selective decreasing".

2. In addition, it would be necessary to ensure the "selective growth" of certain branches of production or services that are neglected by capitalism: solar energy, organic farming (family or co-operative), public transport, etc.

It is obvious that the countries where essential needs are far from being satisfied, i.e. the countries of the southern hemisphere, will have to "develop" much more - to build railways, hospitals, sewers and other infrastructures - than the industrialized countries, but that should be compatible with a system of production based on renewable energies and thus not harmful to the environment.

These countries will need to produce large quantities of food for their populations, which are already affected by famine. But, as the peasant movements organized on the international level by the Via Campesina network have been arguing for years, this is an objective that it is much easier to attain via peasant organic farming organized through family units, co-operatives or collective farms, than by the destructive and antisocial methods of the agribusiness industry whose the principle is the intensive use of pesticides, chemical substances and genetically modified organisms. The odious present system of debt and imperialist exploitation of the resources of the South by the industrialized capitalist countries would give way to an upsurge in the technical and economic support of the North to the South.

There would be no need at all - as certain puritan and ascetic ecologists seem to believe - to reduce, in absolute terms, the standard of living of the European and North American populations. It would simply be necessary for these

populations to get rid of useless products, those which do not satisfy any real need and whose obsessive consumption is supported by the capitalist system. While reducing their consumption, they would redefine the concept of standard of living to make way for a lifestyle which would actually be much richer.

How to distinguish genuine needs from artificial, false or simulated needs? The advertising industry - which exerts its influence on needs by mental manipulation - has penetrated every sphere of human life in modern capitalist societies. Everything is fashioned according to its rules, not only food and clothing, but also fields as varied as sport, culture, religion and politics. Advertising has invaded our streets, our letter-boxes, our television screens, our newspapers and our landscapes in an insidious, permanent and aggressive way.

This sector contributes directly to conspicuous and compulsive spending habits. Moreover, it involves a phenomenal waste of oil, electricity, working time, paper and chemical substances, among other raw materials - all of this paid for by the consumers. It is a branch of "production" which is not only useless from the human point of view, but which is also in contradiction with real social needs.

Whereas advertising is an essential dimension of a capitalist market economy, there would be no place for it in a society of transition towards socialism. It would be replaced by information on products and services, provided by consumers' associations. The criterion for distinguishing a genuine need from an artificial need would be its permanence after the suppression of advertising. It is clear that for a certain time old spending patterns will persist, because nobody has the right to tell people what they need. The change in models of consumption is a historical process and an educational challenge.

Certain products, such as the individual car, raise more complex problems. Individual cars are a public nuisance. On a world scale, they kill or mutilate hundreds of thousands of people every year. They pollute the air of the big cities - with very harmful consequences for the health of children and the elderly - and they contribute considerably to climate change.

However, the car satisfies real needs under the present conditions of capitalism. In a process of transition towards ecosocialism, public transport would be readily available and free - above ground and underground -, while there would be protected lanes for pedestrians and cyclists. Consequently, the individual car would play a much less important role than it does in bourgeois society, where it has become a fetish product promoted by insistent and aggressive advertising. In this transition towards a new society, it will be much easier to reduce in a Draconian fashion the transport of goods by road - which is responsible for tragic accidents and the too high level of pollution - and to replace it by transporting goods by rail or by transporting lorries by rail: only the absurd logic of capitalist "competitiveness" explains the development of road transport.

To these proposals, the pessimists will answer: yes, but individuals are motivated by infinite aspirations and desires which must be controlled, analyzed, driven back and even repressed if necessary. Democracy could then undergo certain restrictions. However, ecosocialism is founded on a reasonable assumption, already supported by Marx: the predominance of "being" over "having" in a society without social classes or capitalist alienation, i.e. the primacy of free time over the desire to have innumerable objects: personal fulfilment by means of real activities - cultural, sporting, playful, scientific, erotic, artistic and political. Commodity fetishism encourages compulsive buying through the ideology and the advertising that are proper to the capitalist system. Nothing proves that this is part of "eternal human nature".

That does not mean, especially for the transitional period, that conflicts will be non-existent: between the needs of environmental protection and social needs, between the obligations concerning ecology and the need to develop basic infrastructures, in particular in the poor countries, between popular consumption habits and the lack of resources. A society without social classes is not a society without contradictions or conflicts. These are inevitable: it

will be the role of democratic planning, in an ecosocialist perspective freed from the constraints of capital and profit, to resolve them thanks to open and pluralist discussions leading society itself to make the decisions. Such a democracy, common and participatory, is the only means, not to avoid making errors, but to correct them by the social community itself.

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[1] Available on the site of *International Viewpoint*: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>.

[2] Here is what the document says: "According to the IPCC, the maintenance of the current trends as regards emissions would lead, between now and the year 2100, to a rise of the average surface temperature ranging between 1.1 and 6.4°C compared to 1990. The width of the range is explained by the double uncertainty which comes from the climatic models, on the one hand, and the scenarios of human development, on the other hand."

[3] "Given the urgency of the situation and for social reasons, the capture and sequestration of carbon could be acceptable as a transitional measure, in the framework of a strategy of a rapid abandonment of fossil fuels: it could, in particular, make it possible to plan the redeployment of miners. But it is not envisaged this way at the moment. It is, on the contrary, a new capitalist attempt to push back physical limits without caring about the consequences. Governments talk about "clean coal", but it is a myth if we take into account the great difficulty of mining it, dust pollution, the consequences for health and the ecological impact of coal mines."

[4] 4. "The goal of this movement is not to work out sophisticated platforms but to force governments to act at least in accordance with the most careful conclusions arising from the evaluation reports of the IPCC, to respect the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", social and democratic rights and the right of everyone to a human existence worthy of the name. We defend this goal against the currents which lower the objectives of reduction in emissions in the name of realism, but also against those who denounce them as insufficient (we try to bring the latter round by asking "as a minimum" for the respect of the "most careful" conclusions of the IPCC)."