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COP 21, a summit of falsehood

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Description:

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From initial warnings to absolute urgency

Since its creation, this body of a particular type (its assessments are written by scientists, but the "summaries for policy makers" are negotiated with the representatives of the states) has released five bulky reports. All have valid initial hypotheses: the average surface temperature of the Earth increases, this increase is due almost entirely to anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, and the most important of these is carbon dioxide from the combustion of fossil fuels. [1]

The IPCC has said it for more than twenty-five years: in the absence of a strong reduction of emissions, global warming will lead to an increase in sea levels, a multiplication of extreme weather events, a decline in agricultural productivity, a reduction of drinking water available, and a marked decline in biodiversity as well as health consequences. This is not the only environmental problem, but it is without doubt the central problem.

The five reports are only distinguished by the accuracy and the level of increased probability of the projections. In addition, with the time that has gone by since the creation of the IPCC, the projections can be compared to the observations and the conclusion is worrying: the reality is worse than what the models predicted [2].

Fossil fuels cover 80% of the energy needs of the planet. The energy issue is therefore at the centre of the challenge. As Naomi Klein notes in her latest book [3]: if policymakers had quickly taken the bull by the horns, they would have (maybe) been able to steer a relatively gentle transition toward a system based exclusively on renewable sources and maximum efficiency in their use. But they have not done so, so that we are today faced with a situation of absolute urgency, where the threat can only be dealt with by extremely drastic measures - precisely what the policy makers wanted to avoid!

Framework Convention and Kyoto Protocol

The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 had adopted, with great pomp, a convention (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC) by which the parties set the objective of avoiding a "dangerous disturbance" of the climate system, taking due account of the fact that not all countries have the same historic responsibility in global warming, nor the same capabilities to cope. By virtue of these principles of "common but differentiated responsibility", and differentiated ability, the "developed" countries at the third Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC (COP3) concluded the Kyoto Protocol by which they undertook to reduce their emissions by 5.2% between 2008 and 2012, compared to 1990.

The effort that the "developed" countries would have had to make was derisory, especially as it could be achieved by sleight-of-hand, whose two main aspects are the market in tradable emission rights (offered freely and in excess to

enterprises) and the possibility for the countries of the North of replacing domestic reductions by the purchase of emission credits generated by so-called "clean" investment (the majority are not at all clean), or by forest management measures (to the detriment of indigenous peoples) in the countries of the South [4]. Nevertheless, the USA refused to ratify the Protocol.

Kyoto was a deception. It played a decisive role in the failure of the COP in Copenhagen in 2009, which was supposed to adopt a global climate agreement. The South denounced the lack of concrete engagement from the North. Globally justified, this denunciation was, however, not free of ulterior motives, mainly (but not exclusively) among the major so-called "emerging" countries and the oil producers, anxious that fossil resources boost their economies as long as possible.

At the end of a turbulent general assembly, marked in particular by the muscular interventions of Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, the summit adopted a declaration prepared in the corridors under the leadership of the United States and China, the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases (although their historical responsibility for global warming remains very different).

Copenhagen and pot luck

Copenhagen was a failure, but the summit took an important methodological option since the parties chose to abandon a top-down solution based on the determination of the "carbon budget" still available globally and on its division according to the responsibilities and capacities of the country.

Establishing a "carbon budget" means agreeing that X amount of carbon can still be sent into the atmosphere to respect a maximum warming of Y degrees. This is the only methodology that is both scientifically rigorous and - potentially - just, from the point of view of the differentiated responsibility. However, it makes the ecological constraint very clear and the assessment of responsibility is inescapable [5].

Since every government wished to have margins of manoeuvre, the COP decided that each country would communicate its climate action plan (in the jargon: "its nationally determined intentions of contributions") to the secretariat of the UNFCCC, and that the negotiations would be on this basis, i.e. according to the model of pot luck [6]

In addition, Copenhagen took the decision to create a Green Fund for the climate, by which the developed countries would contribute to the adaptation to and mitigation of climate change in developing countries. The COP in Cancun, the following year, fixed an annual amount of one hundred billion dollars from 2020 onwards, but the Fund (whose principal manager is the World Bank) does not yet contain a tenth of that sum - and the governments of the North are thinking more of loans than of donations.

Nearly twenty years after the Rio Summit, Cancun also put a figure on the central objective of the UNFCCC: it was in effect decided that the "dangerous" limit which should not be exceeded would be 2°C compared to the pre-industrial period (1.5 degrees if necessary "according to the development of science"). A positive decision at first glance, but there are two key caveats.

The first downside is political-scientific: the choice of 2°C as a threshold of danger is very questionable. This 2°C was popularized by a study by the economist Nordhaus, who chose this figure because it appeared to match a doubling of the atmospheric concentration in CO₂. From 1990 a report of the Stockholm Environment Institute considered it

preferable not to exceed 1°C, but the 2°C maximum was imposed when the European Commission, in 1996, made it its goal [7]

For all that, things are far from settled. At Cancun, more than a hundred countries - small island states and "less developed countries" - revived the call for the level of danger to be fixed at 1.5°C. It was decided to study the issue and to do this COP 18 (Doha) set up a "structured expert dialogue" (SED). Released in May 2015, the report of this dialogue was that a warming of 2°C is too dangerous and that 1.5°C would reduce the risks [8]. An example of these risks is provided by Anders Levermann, one of the "lead authors" of the chapter on "sea level rise" of the fourth IPCC report: he believes that any degree of temperature increase (we have already reached 0.8°C) will result in balance in an 2.3 meters rise in sea levels [9]

Aggregate data on the distribution of population according to altitude is lacking, but it is estimated that an increase of one meter will involve the displacement of several hundred million people. Imagine the consequences of a rise of 4.6 meters.

The second downside is methodological: nothing is planned so that the INDC should be corrected in order to effectively respect the limit. In fact, the system of pot luck allows the protagonists to flaunt themselves in front of the media saying "the situation is under control, we are acting so as not to exceed 2°C of global warming", while not doing what is necessary to reach the target.

And indeed, they do not do the necessary, to say the least! Global emissions increased by 1% annually in the 1980s, and continue to increase two times more quickly today. At this rate, if nothing changes, global warming could reach 6°C by the end of the century, or even 11°C beyond that [10].

Will the governments conclude a treaty during COP 21, in Paris in December? It is likely, but not certain. What is certain, however, is that system of pot luck gives full satisfaction to the multinational corporations who see in the climate challenge only the desirability of "new markets": markets in carbon, renewable sources, capture-sequestration, ownership of resources, adaptation (all involving an acceleration of privatization, including water in particular). It gives them full satisfaction because this whole policy was established in consultation with the employers, as was seen for example last May, when Paris officially welcomed the "Business and Climate Summit" (see box below).

What is certain is that this potential treaty will be dust in the eyes. The tone is set by the agreement concluded in late 2014 by the two major polluters, China and the United States. In the best case, if the European Union respects its commitment (inadequate, and undermined by the sleight-of-hand mentioned above) to reduce its emissions by 40% by 2030, if the other developed countries align with the INDC of the United States (a goal for 2025 at just above what the USA would have had to achieve in 2012 in the context of Kyoto) and if the developing countries align with that of China (no absolute reduction in emissions before 2030), the most likely outcome will be an increase in temperature of 3.6°C by 2100. Almost as much in less than a century as since the end of the last Ice Age, twenty thousand years ago. An unspeakable disaster, unimaginable, terrible. More exactly: a crime, that COP21 has the function of concealing.

The COP of the multinationals

The fruit of the United Nations commitment to involve the business community in the negotiation, the Business and Climate summit organized in Paris in May 2015, was supported by various lobbies, including the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. The WBCSD has among its two hundred members some of the largest

polluters on the planet (Shell, BP, Dow Chemicals, Petrobras, Chevron and so on). It is chaired by the boss of Unilever and was founded by Stephan Schmidheiny, the former CEO of Eternit.

Speaking before this gathering, French president François Hollande literally promised, not the moon, but the earth: "Companies are essential because they are the ones who are going to translate, through the commitments that will be made, the changes that will be necessary: energy efficiency, the rise of renewable energy, the ability to transport with a mobility that is not energy consuming, energy storage, the method of construction of habitats, the organization of cities, and also participation in the transition process, the adaptation of the developing countries".

Growth or climate, we must choose

The cause of this appalling situation lies not in the technical impossibility of emerging from reliance on fossil fuels, or in demographic pressure, but in the very nature of the capitalist economic system. "A capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms", said Schumpeter. Today, nobody can deny that this is the heart of the question. In effect, saving the climate involves emission reductions so drastic that they are not feasible without a significant decrease in energy consumption. And such a decrease in its turn is not possible without significantly diminishing the processing and transport of materials. In other words, without renouncing growth.

The progress of energy efficiency does not allow us to escape this physical constraint. Indeed, in addition to the fact that it too has physical limits, we find that this progress is more than offset by the "rebound effects" (the energy saved is used to produce something else, or the same thing in greater quantities). This is inevitable as long as productivist logic, entrepreneurial freedom and competition for markets remain the rule.

Technologies are not a solution. On this point, the last report of the IPCC gives a false picture of the reality. According to this report, in the conditions studied (i.e. with maintenance of growth), respect for the 2°C limit is only possible if the emissions of the global energy system became negative from 2070 (in other words: if the system captures more CO₂ than it emits). To achieve this result, the scenarios used all employ the massive use of the biomass with capture-sequestration. Indeed, the work compiled by Working Group 3 of the IPCC 1) does not provide evidence that this technology is safe and 2) provides no guarantee as to the social and environmental consequences of this technological choice [11]. However, these are potentially very formidable, by introducing competition into energy and non-energy cultivation, on the one hand, and by the impact on biodiversity, on the other.

In reality, in a general way, the many scenarios which claim to reconcile growth and the transition toward a carbon zero system by respecting the limit of 2°C are all biased by the non-taking into account of one or the other of these problems, and the mother of all these problems has a name: capitalism [12]. But "capitalism" and "growth" are taboo words, which the researchers of the IPCC refrain from using.

In an analysis of the text which serves as a basis for the negotiations for Paris, Pablo Solon drew attention to another crucial point, which returns to the same anti-capitalist conclusions by another, more specific, path: while they are decisive for staying under the bar of 2°C, the reduction commitments for the deadline of 2030 are non-existent [13]. Quite rightly, the ex-ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations attributed this fact to the pot luck method. But the underlying question arises: why this silence in particular on the 2030 deadline?

The answer lies mainly in three elements, which have everything to do with the substantial funds benefiting climate change denial campaigns: capitalized fossil reserves, the depreciation of the energy system (based on the fossils at 80%) and the intertwining of these two levels of financial capital which run the world.

To save the climate, 1) the oil, gas and coal companies should stop operating four fifths of the fossil reserves of which they are owners, which form part of their assets and which determine their listing on the Stock Exchange [14]; 2) the major part of the global energy system - almost a fifth of global GDP - should be scrapped before depreciation [15]; and 3) in both cases, this destruction of capital would result in a huge financial crisis, the bursting of a huge bubble.

Systemic crisis and social project

The COP 21 will be a summit of falsehood, of business and climate crime. A provisional summit, unfortunately: if he does not encounter resistance, the system will go much further in social and environmental destruction. That is to say that the expressions of "ecological crisis" or "anthropogenic climate change" are misleading. It is overall, in terms of systemic crisis, a historic impasse of capitalism, that it is appropriate to understand the situation. And it is in this framework that strategies must be invented. The anti-capitalist left is challenged to advance a project of a non-productivist society and to develop practices, demands, forms of organization enabling its implementation

A very broad mobilization is in progress which should see its first culmination in Paris, during COP 21, and continue beyond that. The organizers want to converge movements of all the exploited and oppressed. Peasant unions and indigenous peoples are in the front line of a battle based on practices of conquest of the common where women play a major role. Broad layers of youth are already involved in the struggles against major infrastructural projects in the service of fossil fuels. But the labour movement is lagging behind.

The unions are involved in the mobilization, certainly. But it is not only about that. It is about bringing the masses of workers to consider this fight as theirs, so as to contribute daily by their own action. It is a decisive challenge but difficult. It can be met only by a double movement of democratization of the unions and of anti-capitalist radicalization of their program as well as their practices. Without this, the "just transition" demanded by the International Confederation of Trade Unions risks being only an accompaniment to the capitalist strategy and its consequences.

The convergence of movements underlines the need for a non-capitalist project of society adapted to the demands of our time. An eco-socialist project, which seeks the satisfaction of real human needs, democratically determined while respecting prudent ecological constraints. Although still imprecise, this self-managed project, decentralized, feminist and internationalist, which renounces the fantasy of "domination over nature" and the obsession of "always more", already lives in the struggles of emancipation. There is no more urgent task than to do make it grow.

[1] The increase in solar radiation explains around 5% of warming observed. The IPCC reports are available at <http://www.ipcc.ch>

[2] This is particularly the case with regard to rising sea levels: the reality observed is 3mm/year, against 2mm in the projections

[3] Naomi Klein: "This Changes Everything. Capitalism vs. the Climate", Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2014

[4] Up to a recent date, the European System of exchange of emission rights was the only market of this kind. Recently, other markets of this type have been established in some regions of China and the USA. The "clean" credit-generating investment in the South constitutes the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Forest projects fall within the REDD+ mechanism

[5] According to various estimates, the carbon budget still available not to exceed 2°C will be exhausted by 2030 at the current pace of emissions. See the projections of Kevin Anderson, director of the Tyndall Institute on Climate Change Research. <http://tyndall.ac.uk/communication/...>

[6] <http://paristext2015.com/2015/05/th...>

[7] The INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions) tabled for COP 21 are available here: <http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/...>

[8] <http://climateanalytics.org/files/b...>

[9] <http://www.realclimate.org/index.ph...>

[10] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/natio...> See also the communication of K. Anderson, op. cit. , or James Hansen et al.
<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/ar...>

[11] <http://paristext2015.com/2015/06/1-...> See also <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/jour...>

[12] This applies also for the scenarios of the NGOS, such as Greenpeace's "Energy Revolution" or the French "Negawatt" scenario (from the association of the same name)

[13] See <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...>

[14] <http://www.carbontracker.org/report...>

[15] World Economic and Social Survey 2011, "The Great Green Technological Transformation"