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Ecology

The futility of green capitalism

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Daniel Tanuro's new book, *L'impossible capitalisme vert*, or "The Futility of Green Capitalism", is a major contribution to our analytical understanding of ecosocialism. Tanuro, a Belgian Marxist and certified agriculturist, is a prolific author on environmental history and policies.

Addressed primarily to the Green milieu, as the title indicates, this book is a powerful refutation of the major proposals advanced to resolve the climate crisis that fail to challenge the profit drive and accumulation dynamic of capital. Much of the book appears to be a substantially expanded update of a report by Tanuro adopted in 2009 by the leadership of the Fourth International as a basis for international discussion.

Tanuro's book includes much additional material elaborating his central thesis that climate degradation cannot be dissociated from the "natural" functioning of capitalism as a system and that a valid "emancipatory project" to confront and overcome the impending crisis must recognize natural constraints and aim for a fundamental redefinition of what we mean by social wealth.

Among the topics of particular interest to readers are extended critiques of popular writers on climate crisis ranging from Jared Diamond to Hans Jonas and Hervé Kempf, as well as his critical assessment of the contributions of Marxist writers such as John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett. Tanuro makes a compelling case against many ill-conceived nostrums such as the Sierra Club's campaign for immigration controls, or such cost-efficiency based market mechanisms as carbon trading and ecotaxes.

A major feature of the book is its cogent explanation of how Marxist value theory explains the ecological crisis and points to its solution. He also addresses what he considers a major deficiency in Marx's ecology, an inadequate appreciation of the crucial implications of capitalism's reliance on non-renewable fossil-fuel resources. This aspect is explored in detail in Tanuro's article "Marxism, Energy, and Ecology: The Moment of Truth," published in the December 2010 issue of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

We hope that this outstanding book will soon be published in English and other languages.

In the following interview, Daniel Tanuro outlines some of the major themes in the book. My translation from the French, *À propos du capitalisme vert*.

Richard Fidler

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Concerning Green Capitalism

Daniel Tanuro, you are the author of *L'impossible capitalisme vert*, published by Les empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte. You are also the founder of the NGO "Climat et justice sociale." What is "green capitalism"?

D.T.: The expression "green capitalism" may be understood in two different ways. A producer of wind turbines may

boast that he is engaged in green capitalism. In this sense “in the sense that some money is invested in a “clean” sector of the economy” a form of green capitalism is obviously possible and quite profitable. But the real question is whether capitalism as a whole can turn green, that is, whether the global action of the numerous and competing capitals that constitute Capital can respect ecological cycles, their rhythms, and the speed by which natural resources are reconstituted.

That is the sense in which my book poses the question and it answers in the negative. My main argument is that competition impels each owner of capital to replace workers by more productive machines in order to achieve a superprofit greater than the average profit.

Productivism is thus at the heart of capitalism. As Schumpeter said, “a capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms.” Capitalist accumulation is potentially unlimited, so there is an antagonism between capital and nature, as the latter’s resources are finite. It may be objected that the productivity race leads capital to be increasingly resource efficient, as expressed for example by the observed decrease in the quantity of energy necessary for the production of a percentage point of GDP. But this tendency to increased efficiency obviously cannot be prolonged indefinitely in a linear way, and empirically we find it is more than offset by the growing mass of commodities that are produced. Green capitalism is therefore an oxymoron, like social capitalism.

This observation opens a debate between two opposing strategic conceptions. For some, the spontaneously ecocidal functioning of capitalism can be corrected through political action within the system by resorting to market mechanisms (taxes, fiscal incentives, tradable emission rights, etc.). For others, including me, our policy must be to break with capitalism because if the environment is to be saved it is absolutely indispensable to challenge the fundamental laws of capitalism. This means daring to challenge private property of the means of production, the foundation of the system.

In my opinion, the debate between these two lines is decided in practice by the example of the struggle against climate change. In the developed capitalist countries, we are confronted with the obligation to abandon the use of fossil fuels almost completely in barely two generations. If we exclude nuclear power “and it must be excluded” this means, in Europe for example, dividing by about one half the final consumption of energy, which is possible only by reducing to a substantial degree the processing and transportation of material.

The transition to renewables and reduction in energy consumption are linked and necessitate major investments which are inconceivable if the decisions remain subordinate to the dogma of cost efficiency. The alternative to cost efficiency can only be democratic planning focused on social and ecological needs. And such planning in turn is possible only by breaking the resistance of the oil, coal, gas, automobile, petrochemicals, naval and aeronautic construction monopolies, for they want to burn fossil fuels for as long as possible.

Climate change is at the center of your book. You interpret this change as a “climate tipping” [basculement climatique]. What do you mean by tipping, and why do you consider it to be otherwise more disturbing than a mere change?

D.T.: The expression “climate changes” (and I do mean changes, in the plural) suggests the repetition of climate variations analogous to those in the past. But between now and the end of the century, in a few decades, the Earth’s climate risks changing as much as it has during the 20,000 years that have elapsed since the last Ice Age. There is now no doubt that we are not very far from a “tipping point” beyond which it will no longer be possible to prevent the eventual melting of the icecaps formed 65 million years ago. The word “tipping” is indisputably more adapted to describing this reality than the word “changes”! The speed of the phenomenon is unprecedented and poses a major threat, for many ecosystems will be unable to adapt. This applies not only to the natural ecosystems but also, I fear, to some ecosystems engineered by human beings.

The futility of green capitalism

Look at what is happening in Pakistan: designed by the British colonizer to serve their imperialist interests, the water management mechanisms of the Indus using dams and dikes which supply an extensive irrigation system are proving inadequate in the face of exceptional floodwaters. And this risk is increasing because the warmer climate disrupts the monsoon regime and increases the violence of the downpours.

It seems to me illusory to hope that this race will be won by reinforcing the existing infrastructures, as the World Bank and the big capitalist groups specializing in public works propose. Instead of building dikes it would be more reasonable to restore the flexible management of water levels that was practiced prior to colonization. That is what is proposed by the International Rivers Network: allowing floods to clear the sediment and prevent the silting up of the basin, feeding the Delta, stopping deforestation, accommodating zones liable to flooding, etc.

But that requires a complete overhaul of the mechanisms over more than 3000 km, with major implications for territorial management, agricultural policy, urban policy, energy production, etc. Socially, such an overhaul, to be achieved in two or three decades (that is, very quickly for work of such scope!), means challenging the power of the landed oligarchy and the development programs that the IMF and World Bank impose through the debt. And this debt must be canceled or else the reconstruction will be heavily mortgaged and the country strangled, in danger of entering history as the first example of a regressive spiral in which global warming mutually links all the mechanisms of underdevelopment and multiplies their negative effects.

We see clearly in this how the social and environmental questions are interpenetrated. In fact, the fight against climate tipping requires a policy shift toward another model of development centered on the satisfaction of peoples' needs. Without that, further catastrophes, even more terrible, may well result, and the poor will be the major victims. That is the warning emerging from the tragedy in Pakistan.

You think the countries of the South should "skip" the fossil energy stage in managing their development and go directly to that of renewable energies. What is your answer to those who object that renewable energies are not (technically and quantitatively) able to do this?

D.T.: I tell them they are wrong. The solar energy flow that reaches the surface of the earth is equivalent to 8 to 10 thousand times the planet's energy consumption. The technical potential of renewable energies "that is, the share of that theoretical potential that is usable through known technologies, independently of cost" represents 6 to 18 times the world's needs, according to estimates. It is certain that this technical potential could increase very rapidly if the development of renewables were finally to become an absolute priority in energy research policies, which it is still not at present. The transition to renewables certainly poses a host of complex technical problems, but there is no reason to think they are insurmountable.

The major obstacles are political. One: without exception, renewable energies remain more expensive than fossil energies. Two: the transition to renewables is not the same thing as changing fuel at the pump: it is necessary to change the energy system. That requires enormous investments and, at the beginning of the transition, these will necessarily be consumers of fossil energy and therefore additional generators of greenhouse gas; these additional emissions must be offset and that is why, in the short run, the reduction of final consumption of energy is the sine qua non condition for a passage to renewables which, once carried out, will open new horizons.

I repeat: there is no possible satisfactory solution without confronting the dual combined obstacle of capitalist profit and growth. This means, in particular, that the clean technologies controlled by the North must be transferred free of charge to the South, on the sole condition that they are implemented by the public sector and under the control of the local population.

You advocate a social ecology which you call ecosocialism. What is an ecosocialist? And how does he or she differ from a “plain and simple” ecologist or socialist?

D.T.: An ecosocialist differs from an ecologist in that he analyzes the “ecological crisis” not as a crisis of the relationship between humanity in general and nature but as a crisis of the relationship between an historically determined mode of production and its environment, and therefore in the last analysis as a manifestation of the crisis of the mode of production itself. In other words, for an ecosocialist, the ecological crisis is in fact a manifestation of the crisis of capitalism (not to overlook the specific crisis of the so-called “socialist” societies, which aped capitalist productivism). A result is that, in his fight for the environment, an ecosocialist will always propose demands that make the connection with the social question, with the struggle of the exploited and oppressed for a redistribution of wealth, for employment, etc.

However, an ecosocialist differs from the “pure and simple” socialist, as you say, in that, for him, the only anticapitalism that is valid today is one that takes into account the natural limits and the operational constraints of the ecosystems. This has many implications: a break with productivism and consumerism, of course, within the perspective of a society in which, the basic needs having been satisfied, free time and social relations constitute the real wealth. But also contestation of technologies and of harmful productions, coupled with the requirement of reconversion of the workers. Maximum decentralization of production and distribution in the framework of a democratically planned economy is something else that the ecosocialists stress.

One point that it seems to me important to stress is the need to question the traditional socialist vision that sees any rise in productivity of agricultural labour as a step toward socialism. In my opinion this conception does not allow us to meet the requirements of increased respect for the environment. In fact, an agriculture and a forestry that are ecologically more sustainable necessitate more labour, not less. To re-create hedges, groves, wetlands, to diversify crops and fight for organic produce, for example, implies an increase in the share of social labour invested in tasks of ecological maintenance. This labour may be highly scientific and highly technical “it is not a return to the hoe” but it is not easily mechanizable.

That is why I think that a culture of “taking care” (I borrow this concept from Isabelle Stengers) must permeate economic activities, in particular those that closely affect ecosystems. We are responsible for nature. In a way, this means extending the logic that the left applies in the area of personal care, education, etc. No socialists would argue that nurses should be replaced by robots; we are all conscious of the fact that we need more nurses who are better paid so that patients are better cared for. Well! The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the environment: if it is to be better cared for, there needs to be more labour, intelligence and human sensibility. Contrary to the “pure and simple socialist”, and even though it is difficult, the ecosocialist, because he is conscious of the urgency, tries to introduce all of these questions into the struggles of the exploited and oppressed instead of postponing them until after the revolution.

Many, including myself, are convinced that an effective struggle against climate change necessarily entails a break from productivist capitalism. To this effect, you appeal to “socialized man, the associated producers.” Who are they, and what specifically can they do?

D.T.: You are alluding to the quotation from Marx that serves as an epigraph to my book: “Freedom ... can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature....” We must realize that in Marx’s thinking the rational regulation of exchanges is conditional on the disappearance of capitalism. Indeed, on the one hand the struggle of all against all permanently undermines attempts by producers to associate; on the other hand, a significant fraction of producers “the waged workers” are cut off from their means of production. The latter, including natural resources, are appropriated by the bosses. Deprived of any power of decision, the workers are unable to rationally regulate anything at all concerning production, let alone rationally

regulate interchange with the environment!

To constitute social beings, producers must begin to join together in the fight against their exploiters. This struggle in an embryonic way points to the need for collective appropriation of the means of production and collective usufruct of natural resources. These in turn are necessary but not sufficient for a more harmonious relationship with nature.

That said, we can answer your question about concrete action by examining how different groups of producers understand “or don’t” the need to rationally regulate the interchange between humanity and nature. At present, it is striking that the most advanced positions of an ecosocialist type emanate from indigenous peoples and small farmers mobilized against agribusiness. This is not accidental: both groups of producers are not, or not completely, cut off from their means of production. Therefore they are able to offer concrete strategies for rational regulation of their interaction with the environment. Indigenous people see the defence of the climate as an additional argument in favor of preserving their precapitalist lifestyle in symbiosis with the forest.

As for the Via Campesina peasant movement, it has developed a whole program of concrete demands on the theme that “the peasants know how to cool the climate.” In contrast, the labour movement is lagging behind. This is of course due to the fact that each individual worker is inclined to wish for the smooth operation of the company that exploits him, in order to maintain his livelihood.

Conclusion: the greater the retreat in worker solidarity in the face of the neoliberal offensive, the harder it will be to develop environmental awareness among workers. It’s a big problem, because the working class, by its central role in production, is called on to play a leading role in the fight for the anticapitalist alternative needed to rescue the environment. Indigenous peoples, peasant organizations and youth have an interest in trying to involve more and more unions in climate campaigns “increasing collaboration, rank-and-file contacts, etc. Within the labour movement itself, the task is to promote demands that address the concerns about jobs, income and working conditions while helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

An important issue in this regard is the need for a generalized radical reduction in hours of work without loss of pay, with a drastic reduction in the pace of work and additional hiring to compensate. Another aspect is the extension of a public sector under the control of workers and users: free, first-rate public transportation, publicly owned energy services, public insulation and building renovation firms, etc. Ecosocialists have a role to play in promoting the emergence of such demands.

With L’impossible capitalisme vert, you do not seem to fear being accused of undue alarmism by those who have yet to understand that we have entered the Anthropocene Era, and that it is man that is primarily responsible for runaway warming, especially since the industrial era. Doesn’t green capitalism, like “sustainable development” and “greenwashing”, reflect a desire to deny this responsibility and to “continue as before”? If we are to abandon productivist capitalism, shouldn’t we first alter our behavior as consumers and producers?

D.T.: I am not an alarmist. In my book, I relied almost exclusively on the reports of the IPCC which, in terms of the diagnosis on global warming and its possible impacts, appear to me, whatever is said about them, to be an excellent summary of “good science”, subjected to peer review. It is true that the IPCC lags a bit when it comes to recent discoveries, but this does not change much in its findings.

In fact, I dread the discourse of panic and exaggeration. Too often, it tends to obscure the real threats and real responsibilities. Climate tipping easily lends itself to eschatology, and there is no shortage of gurus to claim that “the planet is in danger”, that “life is in danger”, that “humanity is in danger,” that the “photosynthetic ceiling” will fall on our heads, or whatnot. All of this is excessive. The planet fears nothing, and life on Earth is a phenomenon so tough that

humanity, even if it wished, could probably not come to an end, even with atomic bombs.

As to our species, climate change, by itself, does not jeopardize it. The danger it poses is more circumscribed: around three billion people risk substantial degradation in their living conditions, and hundreds of millions of them – the poorest – are threatened in their very existence. Policy makers know this and do nothing – or almost nothing – because it would cost too much, and thus impede the smooth operation of business. That is the naked reality.

Too often, catastrophic discourse serves to obscure the potential barbarism and dilute the issues in a vague overall sense of guilt: “Don’t waste time quibbling about the responsibilities,” “we are all guilty,” “we must all agree to make efforts”, etc. Meanwhile, the energy lobbies quietly continue burning coal and oil non-stop.

This leads me to the second part of your question about changing our behavior as producers and consumers. Following on what I said earlier, it is worth noting that employees are incapable of changing their behavior as producers. Who produces, how, why, for whom, in what quantities, with what social and environmental impacts? In everyday life, only the bosses have the power to respond to these questions and, ultimately, they respond according to their profits. Employees can only try to have a say in management in order to challenge it and recognize their ability to do better, according to criteria other than profit. This is the dynamic of workers’ control, and ecosocialists should think about how this old demand may be revisited in order to encompass environmental concerns.

In terms of consumption, I think it is necessary to distinguish between individual changes and collective changes. All in all, it is certainly better if someone who travels by plane offsets his CO2 emissions in one way or another, but this offset will mainly allow him to buy a good conscience on the cheap while diverting him from the political struggle for indispensable structural changes. To promote this kind of behavior is to engage in “greenwashing” and it actually means to “continue as before.”

Collective changes are a different matter. They help to validate another possible logic, favour the invention of alternative practices, and contribute to the realization that structural changes are necessary, and will come about through social mobilization. Those changes, such as group purchases of organic produce from farmers, or urban community gardening, are to be encouraged.

Can we fight against climate tipping regardless of the financial and social costs that it represents? Is it urgent to build another model and risk jeopardizing the entire society? Between nature and civilization, what choice is there?

D.T.: To say that another climate policy would jeopardize the entire society in the name of some priority of nature over civilization is to stand reality on its head! What happens in reality is that the present policy jeopardizes civilization while causing enormous and irreversible damage to nature, which is our common heritage. This policy is completely subordinated to the dogma of cost efficiency, and we see what that produces: peanuts. We are heading straight toward the wall.

Of course, a different policy cannot pretend that the cost of various measures is of no importance: between two equivalent strategies to reduce emissions, it is reasonable to choose the one that will be of least cost to the community, all other conditions being equal. But at bottom there must first be a different policy, guided by criteria other than cost, and especially qualitative criteria. In technical terms, an essential criterion is that of energy efficiency at the systemic level.

The great American ecologist Barry Commoner advanced this argument more than twenty years ago. It is thermodynamically absurd, he said, to transport coal over thousands of kilometres to produce electricity which, then conveyed over hundreds of kilometers, will be used to heat household water, something that can easily be done with

The futility of green capitalism

a solar water heater. In social terms, a major criterion must be the protection of people and their well-being, particularly the protection of the poorest. This criterion today is widely ignored, hence the tragedy in Pakistan, among others.

Finally, do you think your ecosocialist project is feasible in the near future?

D.T.: The feasibility of this project depends entirely on the balance of forces between capitalism on the one hand, and the exploited and oppressed on the other. This balance of forces currently favours capital, we should not kid ourselves. But there is no third way possible: the attempts to save the climate through market mechanisms consistently reveal their ecological inefficiency and their social injustice. There is no way other than resistance. It alone can change the balance of forces and impose partial reforms pointing in the right direction. Copenhagen was a first step, a second was the summit in Cochabamba. Let us keep going, let us unite, let us mobilize and build a global movement to save the climate in social justice. This will be more effective than all the lobbying efforts of those who nourish illusions about a green capitalism.

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