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Climate change

COP21: in spite of the show, the glass is 80% empty

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The COP21 Paris Climate Conference has, as expected, led to an agreement. It will come into effect from 2020 if it is ratified by 55 of the countries which are signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and these 55 countries account for at least 55% of global emissions of greenhouse gases. In the light of the positions taken in Paris, this dual condition should not raise any difficulty (although the non-ratification of Kyoto by the United States shows that surprises are always possible).

“Well below 2°C”: how?

The agreement sets the objective of “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.”

In addition, the preamble to the agreement affirms its willingness to achieve these objectives while respecting the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, human rights, the right to health, the right to development, the rights of indigenous peoples, the rights of persons with disabilities and children, gender equality (by promoting the “empowerment” of women) as well as intergenerational solidarity, stressing the importance of a “just transition” for the world of work and taking into account the respective capabilities of countries.

One can of course only agree with these positions, but the text adopted by the 195 countries represented at the COP gives no guarantee that they will be effectively followed. In addition, and more importantly, it remains completely vague with respect to the deadlines for the climate goals to be achieved: it simply says that the “Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science, so as to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century.” However, the peak year, the annual rate of overall reductions of emissions after this peak and the precise time between 2050 and 2100 where the overall balance of emissions/removals is achieved condition the stabilization of warming at such or such a level.

“Reconciling the irreconcilable?”

Taking the floor before the plenary of participants, on December 12, 2015, French President François Hollande welcomed the fact that the conference had “reconciled what seemed irreconcilable” by adopting a document “both ambitious and realistic.” “The decisive agreement for the planet is now”, he concluded. Speaking before him as president of this COP, his foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, welcomed a result representing “the best possible balance.”

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change dates from 1992. It has led to a very insufficient sequel: the Kyoto Protocol. For some years the climate challenge has contributed more and more to undermining the legitimacy of capitalism and the credibility of its political managers. In the wake of the COP in Paris it is already clear that we are going to be faced with a very broad counter-offensive aimed at spreading the idea that the system, contrary to what has been said, is able to stem the disaster that it has created, and that the governments in its service are up to the challenge facing them.

Those who do not believe in the possibility of a green capitalism, who do not believe in particular in the possibility of saving the climate without calling into question the fundamental tendency of the system to growth, therefore have an interest in examining the Paris agreement from this angle: does the COP21 “reconcile the irreconcilable”? This article focuses primarily on this. We will return later on other aspects of the Agreement, such as adaptation, support for the countries of the South, and so on.

So, has Paris given the lie to those terrible grumpy pessimists and eco-socialists? The answer to this question is -at least - 80% “no”. Why 80%? Because, on the basis of the expertise of the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), we can say that only a fifth of the path to stay under 2°C of warming has been taken (and this only on paper!). In other words, it is not a case of the glass half full and half empty: the glass of COP21 is four-fifths empty, at least. Fundamentally, the climate catastrophe continues, the evidence that things deemed irreconcilable can be reconciled has not been presented. We will explain.

Between the Agreement and the INDCs

There are two elements in the negotiation: the agreement adopted in Paris and its preamble, on the one hand, and the projected “Climate Plans” that each country participating in the Conference has adopted and transmitted to the Secretariat of the UNFCCC in view of the COP, on the other hand. In the jargon of the negotiators, these projected climate plans are designated by the acronym INDC (for “intended nationally determined contributions”). The text adopted in Paris poses the objective of a warming lowered to 2°C, as close as possible to 1.5°C. But the INDCs - which relate to 2025 or 2030 - are far from achieving this objective: according to the estimates which have been made, their cumulative effect would be to lead us toward a catastrophic warming of approximately 3°C.

This contradiction between the declarations of intent of the Agreement and the reality of the climate plans of the countries which are signatories to the agreement is not a secret. The preamble to the agreement adopted in Paris, "(emphasizes) with a serious concern the urgent need to tackle the significant gap between the aggregate effect of the promises of mitigation of the Parties in terms of annual global emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020 (on the one hand), and the cumulated emission trajectories consistent with the objective of maintaining the increase of the average temperature of the globe at well below 2°C and to continue the effort to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C (on the other hand)."

This gap between the cumulative effect of the INDCs and the objective of 1.5 to 2°C adopted in Paris has been studied by the ad hoc working group established at the COP in Durban to decide on ways and means to enhance the level of ambition of the climate policy (Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action). On October 30, 2015, in the framework of the preparation of COP21, this working group submitted a detailed report to the Secretariat of the UNFCCC.

In this text, the sum of the INDC emissions at the deadlines in 2025 and 2030 is compared to the “business as usual” emissions, on the one hand, and, on the other to (variants of) the reduction trajectory for global emissions which should be followed, according to the IPCC, for having a 66% probability of keeping warming under 2°C “at least cost” (these trajectories constitute what the last IPCC report called the “least cost 2°C scenarios”).

The method of the authors of the study is simple: they take the “business as usual” emissions as the reference scenario (0% of the 2°C objective) and the “least cost 2°C scenario” as the goal to achieve (100% of the 2°C objective); this done, they express the sum of the emission reductions projected by the INDCs as a percentage of the 2°C objective. Here is their conclusion: “in this comparison, the INDCs are estimated to reduce the difference between “business as usual” emissions and the 2°C the scenarios by 27% in 2025 and 22% in 2030”. That is why

we have said above that “the glass of COP21 is 80% empty”.

It is moreover not excluded that this figure of 80% is lower in reality. The INDCs should be subjected to a more detailed review, to check whether states have not inflated their figures in order to give an image of being good pupils. Cheating of this kind has already occurred several times in relation to the climate (we think for example of the way in which the member states of the EU have overestimated the emissions of their polluting industries, so that the latter receive free of charge a maximum of emission rights resold with profit). The fact that a good number of INDCs rely heavily on removals of CO₂ by forests, or on reductions relating to emissions, and relatively little on net reductions, encourages mistrust. But let us leave this aspect to the specialists and rather see how the Paris Agreement intends to bridge the gap between the INDCs and the objective of a warming maintained between 1.5 to 2°C.

Bridging the gap

In advance, I must confess that one point of the IPCC reports remains for me unexplained: whereas the diagnosis of the severity of climate change is increasingly worrying and the phenomenon is growing much more quickly than projected using the models, how is it that the peak of global greenhouse gas emissions to meet in order for there to be a 66% chance of remaining under the limit of 2°C has been deferred so significantly between the fourth and the fifth report? According to the fourth report, in order not to exceed the 2°C increase, it was necessary that global emissions peak no later than 2015; however, according to the fifth report, it would still be possible to remain under 2°C by starting to reduce global emissions only in 2020, in 2025, and even in 2030 – although at the price of increasingly significant difficulties. I suppose that the authors of the reports do not simply intend to maintain the flame of hope, and that there is a scientific explanation for this elision. But I don't know.

In any case, let us assume that the peak of emissions compatible with 2°C or 1.5°C can indeed only occur in 2025 or in 2030, and go back to our question: how does the Paris agreement envisage bridging the gap between the INDCs and the objective of a warming “well below 2°C”? The answer is in the text adopted: by revising the INDCs every five years, with the aim of increasing the ambition. This revision will be based solely on the goodwill of the parties: the agreement is not legally binding and provides no penalty, so while the house burns down, a commitment as light as this is presented as a historic breakthrough.

One of the important issues here is that of timing: the Paris Agreement will enter into force in 2020, and the first revision will take place only in 2023. Remember that it took eight years to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which concerned only a small number of parties and only implemented derisory emission reductions. To think that in ten years, whereas geopolitical tensions are growing, 195 countries will quickly agree on 80% of the path they must still take to save the climate, is in reality to play Russian roulette with the fate of hundreds of millions of human beings and with the ecosystems. COP21 does not invalidate the eco-socialist analysis, on the contrary it confirms it: the capitalist system, when it comes up against the ecological limits, can only postpone the essence of the problem facing it, making it increasingly complex and dangerous.

Fossil fuels

In relation to the dangers, those who insist on believing that a miracle happened on December 12 at Le Bourget should still ask two more questions:

– How is it that the words or expressions “fossil fuels”, “industry”, “coal”, “oil”, “natural gas”, “car (industry)”, and others equally crucial to the topic which occupies us, do not appear at all in the Paris text? That the word “energy” is only used twice in the same sentence about Africa (plus in the name of the International Energy Agency)?

– Conversely, how is it that the words or expressions “energy transition”, “energy sobriety”, “recycling”, “re-use”, “common goods”, “localization” are never used? That the expression “renewable energy” is used only once, and only about the “developing” countries (“Africa in particular”)? That “biodiversity” is used only once? That the concept of “climate justice” appears only once, as “important for some” - precisely in this same grab-bag paragraph which mentions biodiversity and the importance (“for some” also!) of Mother Earth?

These gaps are not the fruit of chance but the mark of a specific project, a strategy of capitalist response to the climate challenge. The climate negationists seem to be losing the ear of the dominant class, and so much the better. For all that, it would be wrong to consider with relief that the Paris Agreement is a “strong signal”, “would turn the page on fossil fuels” or would mark the turning point toward a “just transition”, as some people have said. Those responsible for the disaster - the fossil fuel and credit sectors, broadly speaking - still hold tight to the rudder.

A turning point but which?

Is Paris a turning point?. Probably. There is probably awareness, at the highest level, of the major, incalculable risk that global warming represents for society, its cohesion and its economy if it is not confronted (the Encyclical of Pope Francis is a manifestation of this phenomenon). It is likely that some capitalist decision-makers do want more than using this COP as a smokescreen to hide the disaster that their political mismanagement has produced since the Earth Summit in 1992, that they will attempt to try to bridge the gap between the INDCs and what is needed to contain warming below 2°C. But it is very unlikely (and this is an euphemism) that they will succeed: their awareness has come very late, fossil fuel capital has its foot on the brake and the multi-polar world is torn by ferocious inter-imperialist rivalries, without clear leadership.

In addition, the objective is not everything, there is also the manner. The “least cost 2°C scenario” that inspires the strategists is the use not only of “soft energies” but also nuclear power, the combustion of fossil fuels with capture-sequestration of carbon, giant hydro-electricity and the combustion of biomass with “carbon recovery”. The fifth report of the IPCC is clear: without this, remaining below 2°C is really “not profitable”, costs explode, and profits are threatened! Sacrilege!

In the hit parade of these sorcerer's apprentice technologies, the combustion of biomass with carbon recovery ranks high (Bio-energy with carbon capture and sequestration, or BECCS). Its supporters argue that burning this biomass, by storing the CO₂ from this combustion and cultivating a new biomass to burn which will absorb CO₂ from the air, will not only reduce emissions but also reduce the stock of CO₂ accumulated in the atmosphere. The reasoning is faultless, but the tremendous consumption of biomass that this project involves can only destroy both the ecosystems and the human communities which live there. Compensation, biomass destruction and carbon storage are the heart of the Paris agreement. The text announces a broad “mechanism for sustainable development”. On reading it, we understand that it will simply amplify to the maximum the “clean development mechanism” of the Kyoto Protocol, through which the European car companies, in particular, “offset” their emissions by investing in the South in “forest” projects on the backs of the indigenous peoples.

This is the “realistic ambition” described by Hollande. This is the true face of what some persist in hailing as the march toward a “green capitalism”. Let us deal with reality. What is being put in place in the name of “sustainable development” is anti-ecological, anti-social, will not save the climate and will require ever more repression to break resistance and silence dissent. Decreed under the pretext of combating terrorism, the French state of emergency is in any account very revealing of certain hidden tendencies of this COP.