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When Capitalism Goes Green

Miguel Amorós

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Ever since capitalism made its appearance on this planet it has done nothing but destroy the natural environment in order to forge its own environment where it has evolved and forced individuals to adapt to it. Science and technology acquired a decisive impulse and were fully developed thanks to the resistance offered to this adaptation, so that capitalism not only has been able to overcome all obstacles but these obstacles have been systematically transformed into opportunities for its own expansion. Growth, deeply ingrained in its nature, will not cease as long as exploitable humanity exists, and that is precisely the new challenge that capitalism is facing. As the productive system expands it becomes more and more destructive. The colonization by the commodity of land and life, of space and time, cannot be stopped without a questioning of its fundamental principles, nor can it continue without endangering the existence of the human species itself. As a result, the ecological crisis leads to the social crisis. Capitalism must continue to grow to prevent this from happening, but must do so without allowing the degradation that accompanies this growth from penetrating the consciousness of those affected by it. To accomplish this it must improvise economic, techno-

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logical and political measures that simultaneously dissimulate its outrages and allow people to live with and make the best of them. Production and consumption, as the experts would say, face a “paradigm shift”. Consumption habits, along with business and political activity, must be carried out in a different way, not, obviously, to save nature, or even to preserve the species, but to save capitalism itself. This is why the politicians’ hearts have turned green. This is why capitalism is going environmental.

The first awakening of ecological consciousness took place long ago. Already in 1955, Murray Bookchin warned against the health hazards of food additives, and in 1962 he and Rachel Carson exposed the harmful effect of pesticides. The abundance promised by capitalism was revealed to be a poisonous abundance. “The crisis is being heightened by massive increases in air and water pollution; by a mounting accumulation of nondegradable wastes, lead residues, pesticide residues and toxic additives in food; by the expansion of cities into vast urban belts; by increasing stresses due to congestion, noise and mass living; and by the wanton scarring of the earth as a result of mining operations, lumbering, and real estate speculation. As a result, the earth has been despoiled in a few decades on a scale that is unprecedented in the entire history of human habitation of the planet. Socially, bourgeois exploitation and manipulation have brought everyday life to the most excruciating point of vacuity and boredom. As society has been converted into a factory and a marketplace, the very rationale of life has been reduced to production for its own sake—and consumption for its own sake.” (*Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, Second Edition, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1986, p. 58.) The depopulation of the countryside, the food industry, the chemicalization of life and the urban leprosy imposed a consumerist, brutalizing, egotistical and neurotic model of life, immersed in an artificial and atomizing environment. Summarizing an era of revolts—the black ghetto in America,

the British pacifist movement, the Dutch Provos, the German youth movement, May '68, etc.—Guy Debord pointed out that: “Pollution and the proletariat are now the two concrete sides of the *critique of political economy*. The universal development of the commodity has been verified entirely as the accomplishment of political economy, that is to say as the ‘renunciation of life’. At the moment when everything has entered the sphere of economic goods, even the water of springs and the air of towns, everything has become *economic evil*. The simple immediate sensation of the “nuisances” and the dangers, more oppressing every quarter, which attack first of all and principally the great majority, that is to say the poor, already constitutes an immense factor of revolt, a vital exigency of the exploited, just as *materialist* as was the struggle of the workers in the nineteenth century for the means to eat. Already the remedies for the ensemble of ills which production creates, at this stage of its commodity wealth, are too expansive for it. Production relations and productive forces have at last reached a point of radical incompatibility, for the existing social system has bound its fate to the pursuit of a literally insupportable deterioration of all the conditions of life.” (“Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time”, in *The Veritable Split in the International*, B.M. Chronos, London, 1990. Originally published in French in 1972 by Ed. Champ Libre, Paris.)

Although the approach to the class struggle was posed in exact historical terms, capitalism’s ability to survive its catastrophes was underestimated, while the capacity of historical consciousness to become a subversive force was overestimated. Thus, while the works of Mumford, Charbonneau, Russell, El-lul and Bookchin went almost totally unnoticed, and ecological awareness remained trapped in mysticism or reformism, far removed from an indifferent proletariat, capitalism overcame its quantitative contradictions with a bold leap forward, developing a nuclear power industry, expanding automobile production, creating a new generation of more dangerous pes-

ticides, flooding the market with lethal chemical products and spewing thousands of tons of gaseous pollutants into the atmosphere. When, during the following decade, these solutions led to catastrophes like Chernobyl, Seveso, Bophal, the Toxic Oil Syndrome—produced by organophosphates but attributed to rapeseed oil—the hole in the ozone layer and global climate change, not to speak of the destruction of much of the earth’s surface due to urbanization and tourism, there was hardly any opposition and the environmentalist movement that emerged soon became an accomplice of capitalism and the renovator of its politics. The leaders of the economy and the State, reflecting upon the catastrophic consequences of their management, were undaunted and chose to become champions of the struggle against the disaster and, with the help of experts and ecologists, proclaimed an ecological state of emergency, that is, a war economy mobilizing all resources, both natural and man-made, and placed them at the service of global economic development, incorporating the environmental cost, or the price of rebuilding the landscape and the necessary expenses to establish a bearable level of degradation. The *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* based its activities on the exposure of this facelift to give domination an ecological alibi:

“Ecologism is the principle agent of censorship of the social critique latent in the struggle against harmful phenomena¹, that is, of the illusion according to which the results of alienated labor can be condemned without attacking alienated labor itself and the society based upon the exploitation of labor. Now that all the politicians have become ecologists, the ecologists do not hesitate to declare themselves supporters of the State...

“The ecologists play the same role, on the terrain of the struggle against harmful phenomena, that the trade unionists play on the terrain of workers struggles: mere intermediaries interested in the preservation of the contradictions whose regu-

above all, this is so that nothing will happen. And nothing can happen since capitalism tolerates a certain degree of self-exclusion in the society it colonizes, because a good part of the world population is in fact excluded from the market and lives on the margin of economic laws. It can even derive profits from this voluntary exclusion through mutual aid programs, alternative tourism and subsidies. This is what the experts call the economy of the “third sector”. What is at stake, however, is not the gradual modification of the margins of capitalist society, but the creation of a new society. The transformation of the world, not taking refuge in isolated pockets. And for this to happen conflict must emerge with force and spread, so that society splits into two irreconcilable factions. One faction wants to abolish the relations of production and consumption, put an end to the exploitation of labor and liberate everyday life, preserve the land and return to a state of equilibrium with nature. The other faction seeks to defend the industrial and developmentalist status quo at any price. No convivial program can solve the problems that capitalism brings in its wake, because a commitment to peaceful methods prevents the ecological crisis from becoming a social crisis, when just the opposite is required, that is, the rope of oppression that holds together the various social sectors must be stretched to its limit in order to provoke an irreparable social breach. When the victims of capitalism decide to adapt life to human conditions controlled by all and set up their counter-institutions, then the time will come for transformative programs and the real autonomous experiences that will restore social and natural equilibriums and reestablish communities on free foundations. A libertarian society can only be created by way of a libertarian revolution.

talism requires a general mobilization on a local, national and international scale, of all the leaders in favor of a conversion of social and labor exploitation, and in favor of a lifestyle subordinated to the imperatives of the new style of consumption; the State as a mechanism of coercion again becomes profitable. That is the charter of eco-capitalism and its leftist and rightist servants. It is entirely possible that the reconversion process may encounter serious resistance from the population that will suffer its effects, for which reason appropriate forms of social control will have to be designed, beginning with the schools, the communications media, social welfare programs, etc., as well as the police and the army. Capitalism and the bureaucracy have no ideals to realize, but an order to defend, on the local and global scale. For them the problems of foreign policy and social conflict are directly security issues, which must ultimately be resolved *manu militari*. Eco-fascism will most likely be the political form of the new ecological reign of the commodity.

In the absence of serious struggles, or, which amounts to the same thing, in the absence of historical consciousness, alongside the pseudo-reformists who sell us their “pragmatism” and their “small victories” in the matter of institutional politics and the capitalist model, real utopians are making their appearance who speak to us of “conviviality”, because for them the remedy for so much evil must not come by way of a liberation struggle but through the peaceful application of a miraculous formula, in this case “curtailment of economic growth”. The means to this end will not result from a conflict generated by the antagonism of one sector of the population with industrial and consumer society as a whole, but from a series of particular convivial initiatives, with good vibes, wherever possible institutionally encouraged and defended by parties, “networks” or NGOs, which will have the virtue of convincing people of the advantages of seceding from the economy. The proponents of “curtailing economic growth” distrust revolutionary methods:

lation they assure; smooth-tongued negotiators adept at haggling (in this case the for the revision of the rules and rates of environmental damage replace the percentages of wage increases); mere defenders of the quantitative at the very moment when the economic calculus is extended to new domains (air, water, human embryos, synthetic sociability); they are, ultimately, the new commissars of submission to the economy, whose price must now include the cost of “a quality environment”. One can already discern the outlines of a redistribution of territory between sacrificed zones and protected zones, jointly administered by “green” experts, a spatial division that will regulate the hierarchical access to the commodity called nature.” (*Address to Those who would rather Abolish Harmful Phenomena than Manage Them*)

The effort to optimize global resources materialized in things like genetic engineering in agriculture, mad cow disease and the avian flu; in fact, the ecological state of emergency exposed by the EdN transformed the planet into an immense laboratory for technological and scientific experimentation, and its entire population into guinea pigs. The catastrophe lost its national character and with globalization escaped from the framework of the State. The ecological crisis could not be restricted to certain super-industrialized zones and called for a global response. This led to the convening of the various environmental summits which, between 1988 and 1997, established guidelines for capitalist development for the years to come: Toronto, Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen and Kyoto. From these summits creative formulas emerged for salvaging development and fighting climate change without changing the prevailing system: Agenda 21, sustainable development, social development, local development... Pure contradictions in terms, since develop-

ment is never local, social or sustainable, because capitalism never functions in the interest of any locality, of the oppressed or of nature. But what the leaders of the world economy did make clear was that no developmentalist euphemism, even if it is based on modern technologies, can function without political and social measures capable of reeducating the population in the new habits of consumption that will make them profitable, since it is the massive adoption of these technologies that will reduce the costs of their application and stimulate private economic interests to invest accordingly. The fight against climate change could be objectively favored by the unstoppable rise in the price of oil and other fossil fuels, but it is up to the “public powers”, that is, the politicians, at least during the first stage, to promote environmentally-friendly business by forcing the population to consume products and services that are certified as “environmentally-friendly”, or by imposing a “new tax policy” that reconciles “the culture of private enterprise” with nature and which punishes the old polluting habits and the squandering of energy, which were normal until now, but are now punishable for the good of the economy. In this way, the State, the parties, international institutions, and to a lesser extent the “social forums”, the NGOs and the sustainability “think-tanks”, play the role of regulatory mechanisms, auxiliaries of the world market, a role which they had lost during the early stages of globalization. At one stroke, the control over the production of cement, fertilizers or synthetic fibers, the recycling of wastes, the construction of new nuclear power plants, desalinization plants or golf courses, investments in renewable energy or the cultivation of crops for bio-fuel production, become political decisions. At the same time, all economic and political leaders discover they are ecologists. Insulation, energy-saving light bulbs, new guidelines for manufacturing automobile engines and, in general, the restructuring of every kind of activity, require enormous financial commitments not accompanied by the requisite profitable

returns, for which the market therefore cannot assume responsibility. It then becomes the job of the State and the political bureaucracy to lend a hand.

The ecological concerns of the world’s leaders conform to the total commodification of the planet provoked by capital’s constant need for expansion. The devastation caused by the expansion of production is of such a magnitude that regulatory control is required not only for the means of production and the productive forces, but also for the land, culture and history, flora and fauna, water and air, light and heat, all of which are now “resources”, that is, raw materials for tertiary activities and productive forces of a new kind. The institutional revitalization that is required by the transformation of the production process and “energy security” have rejuvenated the fortunes of the State party, that is, the political administrative bureaucracy, and this term includes more than just the conglomeration of social democrats, neo-stalinists, greens and civil society groups. An open reformism is being constructed as a fashionable doctrine that is accepted even by the conservatives and rightists, because the whole world understands that the delayers and foot-draggers must be forced into line, the onset of the catastrophe must be postponed and a breathing space must be created for the economy. As opposed to a negative capitalism that does not want to freeze development by way of emissions controls, a suspiciously altruistic capitalism presents the human face of destruction, speaking of sustainability and education for civic responsibility, of responsible consumption and energy efficiency, rooftop solar panels and green taxes, without restricting highway construction, high speed rail development or urban depredations. Traditional development vs. environmentalist development. Evidently, the costs of domination have skyrocketed with pollution, global warming and peak oil, a predicament that the market cannot solve the way it did in the past. Nor is the expansion of the environmental remediation sector of the economy sufficient. The survival of capi-