

Environment, ecosocialism and the foundations of revolutionary eco-socialism

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The concept of eco-socialism is based on a double paradoxical note: the solution to the “ecological crisis” due to the capitalist mode of production necessitates a response of a socialist type, whilst the environmental balance sheet of “actually existing socialism” is catastrophic. I will briefly develop these two elements and then present some foundations of an eco-socialist aggiornamento as it is conceived inside the “International Eco-socialist Network”. I hope to bring forward evidence that eco-socialism is something more than a new label on an old bottle: a necessary alternative adapted to the challenges of our times. [1]

Contents

- [Capitalism = productivism](#)
- [Capitalist productivism \(...\)](#)
- [Stalin doesn't explain everyth](#)
- [Science, technology and \(...\)](#)
- [Centralisation and decentralis](#)
- [Eco-socialism and eco-feminism](#)
- [The question of the subject](#)
- [The fight against unemployment](#)
- [Eco-socialism, an open concept](#)

For eco-socialists, the “ecological crisis” is not a crisis of ecology. It is not nature which is in crisis but society, and this crisis of society engenders a crisis of relations between humanity and the rest of nature. In our view, this crisis is not due to the human species as such. It is not due in particular to the fact that our species socially produces its existence by labour, which allows it to develop and gives substance to the notion of progress. It is due to the capitalist mode of development, to the capitalist mode of production (which includes a capitalist mode of consumption) and to the productivist and consumerist ideology of “always more” that flows from this.

Capitalism = productivism

Capitalism does not produce use values for the satisfaction of human needs but exchange values for the maximisation of profit. This profit is monopolized by a minority fraction of the population: the owners of the means of production. They exploit the labour power of the social majority in exchange for a wage which is lower than the value of the labour supplied.

These owners of the means of production wage a merciless competitive war which forces each of them to permanently seek the means of increasing the productivity of labour through recourse to increasingly perfected machines. “Productivism” (producing in order to produce, which implies

consuming in order to consume) is thus a congenital characteristic of capitalism. Capitalism implies accumulation. The bourgeois economist Joseph Schumpeter put it very simply: "A capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms".

Capitalism is a very effective system of exploitation. It continually improves the productivity of labour and efficiency in the use of (other) natural resources. But this improvement is obviously in the service of accumulation: the relative savings in labour power and materials are more than compensated for by the absolute augmentation of the volume of production so that finally there is an increase in resources consumed in the process. That is why, inevitably, capitalist accumulation simultaneously involves the increased exploitation of human labour and the growing pillage of natural resources.

What are the limits to the capitalist tendency to growth? To this question, Marx replied that "the sole limit to capital is capital itself". The formula is based on the definition of capital, not as a thing (a mass of money), but as a social relationship: the relationship of exploitation by which a mass of money is transformed into more money thanks to the extortion of a surplus value corresponding to unpaid labour. This relationship of exploitation obviously necessitates an input under the form of resources. [2] Saying that "the sole limit to capital is capital itself" thus means quite simply that inasmuch as there is labour power to exploit and natural resources to take, capital can continue to accumulate by impoverishing, by destroying what Marx called 'the two sole sources of all wealth: nature and labour'.

In a general way, the sole conceivable alternative to capitalism is a system which does not produce exchange values for the maximisation of the profit of capitalists but use values for the satisfaction of real human needs (that is, uncorrupted by commodification), democratically determined. A system in which collaboration replaces competition, solidarity replaces individualism and emancipation eliminates alienation. Indeed, such a system - more than a system, a new civilisation - corresponds to the theoretical definition of a socialist society. I repeat it: in general terms, there is no other conceivable alternative.

Capitalist productivism and bureaucratic productivism

At the same time, this conclusion comes up against the harsh reality of historic facts: indeed, it is indisputable that the balance sheet of "actually existing" socialism in the 20th century is one of failure, not only from the viewpoint of human emancipation, but also from the viewpoint of the establishment of as harmonious relationship as is possible between humanity and its natural environment.

No point in detailing this point here: everyone knows about the drying up of the Aral Sea and the Chernobyl disaster. Since this meeting is devoted to the fight against climate change, I would add that the former GDR and former Czechoslovakia hold the sad world record for emission of greenhouse gases per inhabitant: their "performances" in the area were even higher than those of the greatest polluters of the "developed" capitalist world, the USA and Australia.

This negative environmental balance sheet is due mainly to the bureaucratic counter-revolution which triumphed in the 1920s under Stalin. Productivism in the East resulted in a system of bonuses being offered to the managers of nationalized enterprises to encourage them to exceed the objectives of the plan, leading them to utilize and waste the maximum of materials and energy per unit produced. They did not have to worry about the consequences for the quality of production, since consumers had neither freedom of choice nor the ability to criticise, nor the possibility of opposing the social and environmental effects of a production which was not subject to any

“worker’s control”.

From the viewpoint of ecological damage, there is no difference between capitalist productivism and that of the former Eastern Bloc. But capitalist productivism results from very different mechanisms: unlike the director of a nationalised factory in the USSR, the boss of a capitalist enterprise incessantly optimises the quantity of resources used per unit produced, so as to maximise the number of units, and considers the market reaction as a verdict on the quality of their products.

In fact, the productivism of capital is rational from the viewpoint of capitalism and inherent to the social relations which characterise it. On the other hand, bureaucratic productivism appears as a purely irrational creation of the political superstructure: in an economy supposed to satisfy needs, rationality would dictate that production be guided by the democracy of the producers/consumers, which is why this democracy is incompatible with bureaucratic parasitism.

This comparison yields a significant conclusion: capitalist productivism is endogenous to the mode of production, whereas Soviet productivism was exogenous. Thus the disastrous environmental balance sheet of the USSR does not provide irrefutable proof that socialism is by definition and inevitably as ecocidal as capitalism.

Stalin doesn’t explain everything

However, Stalinism and the existence of a privileged bureaucratic caste do not suffice to explain this disastrous balance sheet. To indicate the problem, I will content myself with a citation from Stalin’s most famous adversary, Leon Trotsky. Of all Marxist theorists, Trotsky is undoubtedly the one who best understood the bureaucratic phenomenon, but he was barely conscious of the environmental limits to human development, to put it mildly.

In a famous speech, Trotsky spoke of the “socialist man” who will “move the mountains, enclose the seas and divert the rivers”. I do not want to exaggerate the significance of this quote, nor above all its influence on the course of events. I note it solely as an illustration of the fact that many Marxists had a much less prudent and realistic outlook than Marx on the development of “productive forces liberated from capitalist fetters” [3].

Far from fantasising about the fabulous powers of the socialist superman, Marx believed, more modestly, that “the only liberty possible (in relation to the laws of nature) is that “social man, the associated producers, regulate their exchange of matters with nature rationally”. In the light of the Trotsky quote, it seems obvious that the analysis of the environmental balance sheet of “actually existing socialism” should go beyond the comprehension of bureaucratic productivism. We need to criticise more deeply, examine the theoretical and ideological conceptions which have marked socialism at various levels.

In this spirit, the eco-socialist current to which I belong, embodied by the Eco-socialist Manifesto drawn up by Michaël Löwy and Joel Kovel, has identified a certain number of these conceptions which merit debate and revision. I will cite them and comment on them briefly.

Science, technology and progress

A first question is that of the relationship to “Science”, or rather sciences – without a capital letter. Most socialist thinkers, starting with Marx and Engels, have been strongly influenced by scientism. Indeed, the mechanist idea that the sciences can ultimately explain everything in the smallest detail

is manifestly wrong, since the world is in constant evolution. In addition, the speed of this evolution increases to the extent to which we study smaller and smaller objects, so that, the more the sciences progress, the more they are confronted with new phenomena posing new enigmas

To break with scientism is important for eco-socialists. It is about ending the project of human domination over nature, which implies that nature is considered as a machine and that the human being is only seen as a machinist. This illusory, instrumentalist and reductive project clashes with the principle of precaution, modesty and prudence necessary today if we wish to rebalance the exchanges between humanity and the rest of nature.

A second question, linked to the first, is that of technology, that is, sciences applied to production. Are they neutral or do they have a class character? Although he insists on the “historically determined” character of all aspects of human development, Marx did not settle this precise point. Most socialists after him have considered technology to be neutral. Eco-socialists think that it is not.

The end does not justify the means: certain means are contrary to the end. That goes also for the means of production, and thus for technologies. Nuclear energy, for example, is contrary to Marx’s explicit objective of a society where the producers seek to improve the common patrimony of nature to transmit it to their descendants as “boni patres familias”. The same goes for the combustion of fossil fuels, the cultivation in open fields of Genetically Modified Organisms and large scale geo-engineering projects, for example.

Breaking with scientism and a critique of technologies immediately raises the question of the attitude to be taken to development and progress. Marx did not have a linear vision of this subject, although most Marxists have. What about eco-socialists? They reject the idea advanced by some partisans of negative growth who advocate “exiting from development” because progress is inherently negative, but they also reject the idea that any progress and any developments are positive in themselves. Coherent with their critical approach to technologies, they deepen Marx’s thesis according to which capitalism increasingly develops the “destructive forces” rather than the productive forces.

The developed countries, globally, no longer need a quantitative development but a sharing of wealth necessary to a qualitative development. In this context, eco-socialists accord a great importance to the cosmogony of indigenous peoples and the know-how of peasant communities. They see here sources of inspiration for a progress worthy of the name. A progress which questions capitalist productivist ideology. A progress based on comprehension of the fact that true wealth resides in free time, human relations and a harmonious relationship with the environment, not the compulsive accumulation of consumer goods which often only serve to compensate for the poverty of existence.

Centralisation and decentralisation

A fourth question in debate is that of the articulation between centralisation and decentralisation. Given the historic experience of the USSR, socialism is strongly linked to the idea of a very centralised plan. I do not deny that such a plan was necessary in the 1920s, because the revolutionary regime could only maintain itself if the very small industrial working class could supply the peasant majority with the machines needed to improve the life of the rural communities and eliminate the famines which were so frequent in Russian history. But the idea that socialism is synonymous with centralisation should be questioned.

It is obvious that a government wishing to pursue an anti-capitalist policy must necessarily break the

economic power of the dominant class, which is only possible by the expropriation of finance and the major means of production and distribution. It is also obvious that these socialised sectors should then be reordered to satisfy needs, which requires centralised planning. But it should be stressed at the same time that democracy and self-management cannot fully exist without being rooted in the base, locally. Centralisation and decentralisation should then complement each other.

This articulation is not absent from Marx's thought: on the contrary, he saw in the Paris Commune "the political form, finally found, of the emancipation of labour", and this experience led him to think that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would be concretised in the form of a federation of communes. Subsequently Marxists have largely lost the thread of this thought. Eco-socialists restore its centrality and try to renew it, in liaison with the project of a "21st century socialism".

The climate challenge makes this reflection unavoidable: to have a chance of pursuing over two generations the transition to a 100% renewable energy system, it is undoubtedly necessary to socialise the energy sector. Without that, the capitalists will attempt to impose for as long as possible the use of the gigantic stocks of fossil fuels which belong to them [4].

But recourse to renewable sources requires the interconnection of decentralised energy networks. Their democratic management by communities in the collective interest of inhabitants is a real possibility which eco-socialists should raise by posing concrete local demands for control and participation, rather than confining ourselves to the obsolete model of the big nationalized enterprise.

Eco-socialism and eco-feminism

A fifth question on which eco-socialists work is that of the specific role of women in the fight for sustainable relations between humanity and nature. For feminists of our current, this role does not stem from the fact of women being "by essence" closer to and more respectful of nature, as is thought by some eco-feminist theorists. In our view, there is no more an ecologist female essence than a pacifist female essence, for example. The specific role of women is attributed to them by the capitalist division of labour inside society and the bourgeois family. One of the demonstrations of their oppression is indeed that they take on the biggest share of care work, most often in the form of free services which are not socially recognised as work. Also, women globally ensure 80% of world food production.

Women know what "taking care of the living" involves. Their knowledge in the area gives them a prominent role in the transition, because humanity is precisely faced with the need to "take care" (of the rest) of nature and a large part of the population – in particular in the developed and urbanised world – does not really know how to do so. But this role of women can only be fully valorised in the interests of all if their oppression is recognised and fought against. That necessitates the autonomous struggle of women for equal rights in society in general, the application of "equal pay for equal work" on the labour market and the sharing of domestic tasks. In this sense, eco-socialists support the eco-feminist struggle.

The question of the subject

Taking into account the specific role of women raises another question which I wish to approach before sketching a conclusion. In many respects, it is even a decisive question for eco-socialism: that of the "subject" of social transformation.

Classically, the theorists of socialism considered that the working class – that is, not only factory workers but all those obliged to sell their labour power in return for a wage – is THE subject which plays a leading role in relation to the petty bourgeoisie and all the oppressed layers. This central role as revolutionary class stems from its place in the mode of production: as the most exploited class, the working class has no other possible historic perspective than the collective management of the means of production to satisfy democratically determined social needs.

This traditional analysis has then engendered the idea that the working class plays at all times and in all places the role of vanguard, even if unconsciously, “objectively”. Indeed, the climate struggle reveal a very different reality: in the front line we find the peasants, the landless peasants, the indigenous peoples and the communities in struggle against mining, forestry or infrastructural projects which destroy their environment, with women playing a prominent role in all these struggles.

The fact that social layers distinct from the working class in the strict sense play a vanguard role is not unprecedented. Young people, for example, have often served as a detonator for struggles which, in highlighting an unbearable social or political situation, lead the working class to emerge from its relative passivity. May 1968 in France, where the repression of the “night of the barricades” in the Latin Quarter led to a general strike of ten million workers, is a classic example of this interaction between social layers and classes. There are many others.

However, what we currently face on the environmental front is different and the image of the detonator does not allow us to grasp it. A detonator fulfils a temporary function: to bring about an explosion. However, faced with climate change, we have for many years observed the persistent struggles of peasants, indigenous peoples and communities, and these struggles, up until now, have not made anything at all explode within the working class. The problem is deeper then. It is not simply about a “discordance of the times”, a lack of synch between the rhythms of consciousness of different social classes and layers.

The explanation is in fact relatively simple. When peasants fight against agro-business, when indigenous peoples fight against the appropriation of forests as carbon wells as a source of biomass, when communities fight against extractivist projects which destroy the framework of life and resources, these struggles for immediate demands in favour of the conditions of existence of the groups concerned coincide directly with what must be done to save the climate.

The situation of the working class is very different. Particularly in the current context, where the working class is weakened, ideologically disoriented and pushed onto the defensive, the most immediate demands that it poses spontaneously to defend its conditions of existence do not coincide with what must be done to save the climate, but rather that which destabilizes it. To create or save jobs, for example, a majority of workers hope for the extension of production, an economic recovery of capitalism, of new enterprises. If it is clearly an illusion to believe that this will absorb unemployment, this illusion remains at first sight the most logical response and the easiest to implement. In certain threatened polluting sectors, like the coal mines in Poland, the trades unionists go so far as to doubt the reality of climate change, because they see it as a threat to their jobs.

The fight against unemployment, a central issue

How to deal with this problem? Eco-socialists attempt to respond by proposing demands which respond both to the social needs of the world of labour and to ecological needs (notably the drastic and rapid reduction of greenhouse gas emissions which is indispensable to stabilize the climate

system). To simplify, we distinguish ourselves both from those ecologists who think that the social impact of environmental measures are a secondary problem and trades unionists who believe that the priority is social, that the environment is a problem that can be dealt with later. These two strategies seem to us condemned in advance.

The struggle against unemployment is the main concern of the labour movement (and it conditions the level of wages, the organisation of work, the defence of systems of social protection and so on). Eco-socialists stress a general response articulated at three levels:

- the extension of non-relocatable public employment (notably through public plans for energy renovation of buildings, the transformation of the energy system and the replacement of the hegemony of the car by public transport companies) stressing decentralization and democratic control by the users and workers;
- the collective reconversion, under workers' control, of the workers of useless or polluting industries (in the first place the arms industry and nuclear industry, but also cars, petrochemicals and so on) to other sectors of activity;
- the radical reduction of labour time, without loss of wages, with compensatory hiring and reduction of work rhythms, so that all work, live better and waste less.

This last demand seems to us of a major strategic importance. As Marx noted, it is both the best social demand and the best way in which "social man, the associated producers" can "regulate their exchange of matter with nature rationally" in "the manner which conforms most to human nature".

Faced with unemployment, only a programme of this kind is capable of meeting the dual social and environmental challenge, that of climate in particular. Its implementation requires an anti-capitalist orientation and involves other demands I will not detail here: the expropriation of the energy and finance sectors - a condition sine qua non of the transition - and a long term policy favouring the development of local rural employment in organic agriculture and the maintenance of ecosystems.

This programme can only gain in influence in the workers' movement if it is articulated with the struggles of a combative left against the apparatuses dominated by social neo-liberalism or other bureaucratic currents. The perspective of the apparatuses generally consists in supporting the energy transition as conceived by capitalism (a transition which does not respond at all to the objective of sustainability, being too slow and involving a massive recourse to nuclear power, agro-fuels and the capture-sequestration of carbon) asking only that this transition is "just" [5]. That is why eco-socialists encourage the peasant movements, indigenous peoples and communities to build link and seek convergences with the left inside the trade unions.

To emerge from generalities to advance a programme of well argued concrete proposals for social and energy transition, for example at the European level, constitutes in my view the biggest challenge that eco-socialists should try to deal with. The task is all the more arduous in that it is not enough to replace fossil fuels by renewable energy sources: given the foot dragging for 30 years by governments, greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced so strongly and so quickly that it can no longer be done without reducing material production and transport [6]. Everyone understands that this constraint complicates further the eco-socialist response to the challenge of employment.

Eco-socialism, an open concept

Eco-socialism can be summed up as a will to converge social and environmental struggles on the

basis of the understanding that austerity and ecological destruction are two sides of the same coin: productivist capitalism. Defined thus, it is an open concept, liable to different strategic and programmatic declensions. So there are today several varieties of eco-socialism. The variety that I have presented to you could be defined as Marxist, revolutionary, feminist and internationalist. There are others and we do not claim a monopoly, only the broadest possible debate.

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Footnotes

[1] This text is based on a communication in the context of the week-end of mobilisation on the climate organised on April 10-12 in Cologne by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in collaboration with a series of German ecologist associations. See the [site of the conference](#).

[2] Nature puts the latter freely at the disposal of the capitalist, which explains capital's appetite for the exploitation of mines, natural forests or fish reserves –above all in a period of recession when what is known as “extractivism” attracts capital seeking superprofits

[3] The irony of history is that Trotsky's vision was in part applied by Stalin, in his project to reverse the course of the Siberian rivers from North to South to irrigate central Asia

[4] Remember that to have a 60% chance of not exceeding a 2°C increase in temperature in relation to the pre-industrial era, it is necessary that two thirds to four fifths of proven fossil fuel reserves are never exploited

[5] A very clear example of this is the choice of most French trade union organisations not to oppose the nuclear network

[6] The scenarios of transition towards a system of 100% renewable sources which claims to be compatible with the maintenance of a growth rate of 2-3% per year does not take account of the fossil fuels necessary for the production of renewable converters and the work of energy efficiency improvement of buildings, and the emissions which stem from this