

THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTION

Introduction

As an integral part of nature, humans represent its highest and most complex form. Humanity and nature are inseparably bound together. Physically and socially humanity is a product of, remains bound up with and continues to be reliant on nature.

In addressing this question, we need to pose the question as to whether it is to be done from an isolationist or integrationist perspective. Former implies that we look at the environmental question in parallel to what is considered mainstream social and political struggles, the aim of which is the overthrow of the capitalist system. On the other hand, an integrationist approach would consider it as being part and parcel of the broader struggle against capitalism-imperialism. Environmental and socio-political struggles conducted against free market capitalism have a common cause or origin. Hence the solutions that are to be sought ought to be rooted in a common platform. The issue to face up to is whether the concern of the environmental movement is to be a part of the management of the capitalist system or to be part of the process to overcome and supersede it. Following in the wake of its post world war II boom, the inevitable negative ecological and social consequences that capitalism brought in its wake compelled the ruling elites to start taking action in response to agitation from the ranks of environmental movements. The struggle against nuclear energy in particular stands out in this regard. As a result we saw the Club of Rome report (1972), followed by the Brundtland report, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and in 2002 the World Summit for sustainable development held in Johannesburg. These international environmental forums and initiatives' ostensible purpose was to address the very visible deterioration of the ecosystems that support life on earth. The question of man's relation to nature / the environment was posed anew. The gravity of the situation in the present time, is reflected in the numerous scientific investigations, panel discussions and conferences organised and held at regular intervals all over the globe. These are part of the agenda of the bourgeoisie to attempt to dictate the agenda and pace at which environmental questions and crises are addressed and resolved. In the process of these crises being addressed, the questions of climate and soil quality et al have been assuming a progressively political colouration. This can not be otherwise since the question of political power is intricately bound up with the future well being and survival of humans on planet earth.

Revisiting Capitalist Modalities

In order to appreciate the dire environmental and social consequences that the system holds for the majority of human beings, a reminder of its inner logic and innate processes is necessary. People are generally led to believe in the fetish, which is 'the market'. Furthermore, we are lead to embrace the belief that we either have state action or we rely on the market to deliver the things we need. Capitalist production is based on cyclical processes playing themselves out in the shortest possible time. In order for it to get a return on capital invested capitalism must therefore *impose* processes and rhythms on natural processes that are basically foreign to these natural processes. The imperialistic expansion of capital is a self-perpetuating necessity. Failure to expand implies economic contraction and possible death.

The very logic that underlies the capitalist system is what therefore wreaks havoc with the earth's ecosystems and environmental processes, generally. Infinite capitalist expansion within a finite environment is however a serious contradiction in terms. Capitalism inevitably has to face up to the barriers that the environment holds. The rapid, unbounded economic growth that capitalism demands, in the present time invariably and inevitably conflicts with the maintenance of ecosystems and the biosphere. In the grip of this system the living planet is dismembered as land becomes real estate, forests become lumber and oceans become fisheries and depositories. Clearly

the notion of sustainable development in the capitalist meaning of the term does not and can not be a credible one.

In capitalism, the generation of profits is accompanied by the use of energy-intensive and capital intensive technology, which implies a more rapid depletion of high-energy sources and other natural resources e.g. precious fresh water. This in turn leads to a larger amount of wastes dumped in the environment. The automobile industry in the USA is a case in point? Overshooting certain ecological thresholds as a result of this persistent increase in industrial output has led to irreparable damage done to the environment. It has also led to the emergence of a consumerist culture in which people's heads are filled with information about the latest style and most expensive clothing, but empty of knowledge about human history, culture, science and the environment.

The growth in the size of the world commodity economy has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the number and scope of the earth's ecological problems. Ozone depletion, species extinction, bio-diversity loss, deforestation, global warming, desertification, spread of toxic wastes, pollution of the oceans and land degradation all have their source in the effects of the commodity economy on nature. Since the late 1980's/ early 1990's, global warming has been the one issue that has elicited strong debate and responses.

Global Warming, The Energy Crisis And Ecological Sustainability

These three interrelated matters have been the primary focus for numerous academic and activist agendas since they lie at the basis of the continued propagation of human and other species on the planet. In its 2001 report the IPCC (intergovernmental panel on climate change) concluded that "there is new and strong evidence that most of the warming observed over the last fifty years is attributable to human activities". These activities include the use of fossil fuels such as coal and crude oil for air and road transport, domestic heating, power stations, industry, agriculture etc. It is not claimed that other interacting variables like volcanic eruptions, cloud cover, sun spot cycles, ocean currents and planetary wobbles do not play a role in temperature variations over time. In terms of the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in Kyoto Japan in December 1997 most industrialised countries agreed to legally binding reductions in greenhouse emissions. This has to be achieved in the period 2008 - 2012. It was only in February 2005 that the protocol came into force. The USA, which has 5% of the world's population but consumes 25% of earth's natural resources steadfastly refused to be part of the above arrangement. With hindsight, many observers argue, the targets set under the protocol are far too little, far too late. They maintain that sudden catastrophic climate change can only be prevented by far bigger reductions (up to 30%) of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. So we have a situation where the industrialised countries, wanting more carbon based economic growth, cause the demand for fossil fuel to rise further. High demand for fossil fuel use is also encouraged by the high profits to be made from this industry. The end result is that capitalists continue to structure and entrench the economy around fossil fuels. From some quarters the concept of peak oil suggests that the time when optimal petroleum extraction will arrive and signal the death knell for this industry is much closer than what is commonly thought - within the next ten to twelve years. Hence the current flurry of activities all around the world in search of a more "sustainable" 'energy -mix' and greater urgency in the development of alternative energy technologies.

Responses to the Ecological Crises

These responses are from the powers that be on the one hand and the representatives of the working masses and unemployed millions who find their livelihoods being more directly threatened as the crisis of capitalism deepens.

Insofar as the capitalist class is concerned, it maintains that it is possible to have a situation of coexistence between carbon based, market driven economic expansion on a global scale on the one hand and the environment on the other. The idea is that a further extension of market relations offers the technical answer to all environmental problems that may exist. This effectively means that competition and profit making can proceed without any particular concern for nature. It is believed that science, technology and economic growth (the market) will handle and resolve problems that emerge. This is the 'sustainable development' that the proponents of capitalism advance. The emissions / carbon trading regime which include carbon sequestration technologies as contained in the Kyoto protocol is a system, introduced by the Americans which continue to cause environmental imbalances albeit through different processes. *[In short participants buy and sell contractual commitment or certificates that represent specified amounts of carbon related emissions that are allowed to be emitted. In such a plan a central authority such as a govt agency sets limits or "caps" on each pollutant. Groups or companies that intend to exceed the limits may buy emission credits from groups or companies that are able to stay below their designated/agreed upon limits. This transfer is normally referred to as a trade. Sequestration technology advocates the dumping of excess carbon dioxide in the ocean instead of the atmosphere].*

Another example in this regard deals with the development of "green" fuels in anticipation of peak oil coming about sooner rather than later. Crops such as maize and soya beans will be /are being used to make ethanol and biodiesel. Such home-grown fuels have the benefits of being renewable, running cleaner than petroleum fuels and potentially reducing US dependence on foreign oil. The big winners in this new fuel market will be US grain farmers. Increased demand for maize or soya implies placing greater land areas under cultivation and expanding agribusiness involvement in such ventures. It implies loss of bio-diversity and the development of more mono-cultures. It perpetuates and reinforces the culture of the use of the private motor vehicle at the expense of the development of a more environmentally sensible public transport system.

What the above illustrates is that capitalism is unable to change course. It can not move from a structure and system of accumulation that has proven to be environmentally very harmful. It places profits before the planet. It cannot but place profits before people as well. This, even if factors such as global warming threatens the planet itself.

As indicated earlier, the global ecological and socio-political crises have at base the same mechanism that propels them forward. Common remedies are hence to be sought for this war to be fought against the defenders of the bourgeois order. During the late 1970's and early 1980's the emergence of the Green party phenomenon in Europe gave impetus to struggles having the environment as a rallying point. At present revolutionary socialists have in the Greens a platform towards which an active policy can be developed. Their involvement in government an parliamentary activities stifles Green Party grassroots activism and in so doing to undermine the radical nature of its movement. The case of the German Greens' about turn on the nuclear question is a case in point. Generally bourgeois and petit bourgeois forces coexist with leftists and what is called eco-socialists. In the USA Ralph Nader's candidacy in the presidential race allowed for the involvement of environmentalists in a front advocating anti-globalisation struggles.

On the question of policy the spectrum of political types is mirrored in the range of positions taken up by some in the Green movement: some are anti-population and anti-development. In this regard green-red interaction or collaboration should bring forth the revolutionary socialist perspectives on development, specifically sustainable development - not of a capitalist type but of a type benefiting the ecological and human condition. In the UK the Campaign Against Climate Change, notwithstanding its shortcomings brought environmental, religious, broad based political

groupings (e.g. Respect) together to address programmatic issues germane to the anti-capitalist struggles being conducted there. The ESF also affords opportunities for broader collaboration.

The Situation in Southern Africa

The South African government, through its energy department is also seeking a greater "energy - mix". This has become necessary in view of the targeted 5-6% economic growth rate for the current and ensuing years. In seeking this better mix it is assumed that there was to be a move away from heavily polluting coal power plants. This alas is not to be. A number of new coal based power plants are to be constructed. The same applies to the construction of another nuclear power plant. South Africa has bought into the carbon trading system with the former environment minister V. Moosa heading up a company which is set to make millions trading carbon credits on the stock exchange. Big debates are raging on the reliability of energy supply to the major metropolises.

Privatisation programmes underway in the energy sector has afforded political groupings, community organisations and environmental groups opportunities to collaborate, although trade union participation has been low. Challenges also exist where the construction of pebble bed nuclear reactors is concerned. In the recent past the involvement of NGO's like LPM and the EJNF in forums opposing the neo-liberal agenda of the state pointed to the need for questions dealing with land acquisition and quality and environmental justice to be kept on the agenda on a permanent basis. In this regard the role of the Apdusa has been and will continue to be vital.

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