

## ***CLIMATE AND CAPITALISM***

### **Ecossocialism or Barbarism: There is no Third Way Humanity in the Capitalist Cul-de-sac\***

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Climate change is a major challenge for humanity and the environment. Thirty percent of animal and vegetable species could disappear in a few decades due to rapid changes in rainfall, temperature, acidity, and other serious impacts. Hundreds of millions of people live under the threat of rising sea-levels, droughts, floods and disease. Billions more could suffer water scarcity. The poor are the most exposed, especially in Africa, where the productivity of unirrigated agriculture could decline by as much as 50 percent, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Can a catastrophe be avoided? It depends on where you're living. The people of Tuvalu, a small Pacific island nation located halfway between Hawaii and Australia, for instance, will almost certainly have to abandon their island home before the end of this century. Though climate change must be mitigated, because of the damage already done, some adaptation to its effects is unavoidable. The more quickly and radically we address the basic causes of global warming to prevent its worst effects, the less we will have to adapt. On the other hand, the less we mitigate, the more we will have to adapt, and the more the poor—those most vulnerable to catastrophic climate change—will suffer the negative consequences. Mounting scientific evidence is telling us that at a certain point, adaptation will become impossible.

The IPCC Fourth Assessment Report proposes six climate stabilization scenarios. The most radical requires a 50-85 percent cut in global greenhouse gas emissions before 2050, with most of the cuts taking place before 2015. Because the “developed world” is historically responsible for more than 70 percent of global warming, under this scenario, it should reduce its own emissions by 80 to 95 percent. However, because of the amount of greenhouse gases already released into the atmosphere, we will not be able to avoid devastating climate change without the participation of countries like Brazil, India, China, South Africa, and Mexico.

As is widely acknowledged, accumulation of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) is the main, though not only, cause of global warming. Because coal, oil, and natural gas currently collectively provide 80 percent of the world's energy, a radical reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in 40 years would require a herculean effort, with ominous social, technical, and economic implications. But what is the alternative? Even the most radical IPCC scenario foresees a temperature rise of between 2° and 2.4°C, which is above the threshold where climate change is thought to have dangerous human and environmental consequences.

Can we make that effort? From a scientific point of view, the answer is “Yes, we can.” We can stop burning finite supplies of fossil fuels and use clean renewable energy sources—wind, tidal energy from the oceans, biomass, solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, and

geothermal power—with an emphasis on solar. According to the World Energy Association, the technical potential of these sources is seventeen times what the global energy demand was in 2001. This potential could improve very quickly if a clear political priority was given to research and widespread deployment of renewable energy, instead of nuclear, or even fossil energy, which despite global warming continues to enjoy billions of dollars in government subsidies. Humanity is not doomed to energy scarcity nor are the societies in the Global South doomed to poverty and underdevelopment.

How could we make this effort? The answer is mainly social and political—not technological—for three reasons:

1. Renewable sources are still more expensive than fossil sources, a situation that is likely to prevail for 25-30 years.
2. The global distribution of wealth has to change in order to provide poor countries, and the poor in general, with the enormous resources required to develop and use these clean renewable energy sources.
3. Making the transition to clean renewable energy will be difficult and complicated. It doesn't boil down to simply replacing one fuel with another in the same energy system. It will require a completely different energy system with different infrastructure and equipment. There will be a transitional period in which the building of new infrastructure will require an increase in conventional energy consumption. This will mean that there will have to be reductions in consumption elsewhere. However, the new system that replaces the existing one would be one that satisfies human needs. In order to accomplish that for all the world's people, human needs will have to be viewed and determined differently than they currently are under capitalism. In short, we will need to create another society.

The transportation sector offers a useful illustration of the dilemma. The easiest and cheapest way to replace petrol is to produce agrofuels. But agrofuels compete with crop production, and therefore with the satisfaction of fundamental human needs. Over the last few years, we have seen large increases in the number of poor starving because wheat, maize, cassava, palm oil, and other important food crops are being used to produce “green petrol.” Massive agrofuel production for export intensifies speculative pressure on the land at the expense of traditional communities and has very negative environmental impacts in terms of pollution and biodiversity.

From this we can conclude:

1. It is no longer acceptable to satisfy the need for personal mobility by producing individual cars.
2. The way that commodities are transported must be rejected (the “just-in-time” delivery by planes and trucks on global competitive markets is nothing less than criminal).
3. We have to ask whether we really need all these commodities—what purpose they serve.

On the one hand, billions of people want *essential* goods and services to fulfill very basic human needs. Yet, the capitalist system cannot satisfy them, because it needs

permanent masses of unemployed people—“an industrial reserve army,” as Marx called them—in order to exert permanent pressure on wages to maximize its profits.

On the other hand, the capitalist way of satisfying needs—the production of commodities for profit by competitive businesses, with the tendency always to sell more goods and services to those who can afford them—entails the constant creation of new artificial needs on a mass scale. Overproduction and consumption, mass poverty and massive waste, unfulfilled needs and permanent frustration, exploitation of labor, and the destruction of natural resources are intrinsic aspects of this system. The burning of cheap fossil fuels is a key condition for its functioning.

Of course, fossil fuel stocks are limited, but the reserves are more than sufficient to provoke catastrophic climate change. It is highly unlikely that capitalism will decide not to use these reserves, especially in the present context of world economic recession and fierce competition. It is even more unlikely that capitalism will end its addiction to fossil fuels in time to stabilize the climate.

As a result of 200 years of capitalism, humanity is finds itself in a very dangerous cul-de-sac which could result in barbarism on an unprecedented scale. The escape route is clear. Globally, we must use less energy, produce less material goods, and transfer clean technologies to the Global South. These are key conditions in order to make the transition to renewable sources possible within 40 years. Simultaneously, we must satisfy fundamental human needs, especially in the developing world. The problem is that none of these objectives can be achieved within the framework of a system which, because its objective is profit, can only consider avoiding a catastrophe if the investment is “cost effective.”

The achievement of these objectives requires an anti-capitalist perspective, translated into concrete measures, such as an economic plan, reduction of working time without loss of income, nationalization of the energy sector, and nationalization of the bank and credit sector. The fight against climate change is a matter of class struggle. It is more than that: it is a question of civilization.