

## **From Marx to Ecosocialism\***

*By Michael Löwy*

Since the industrial revolution, capitalist societies (and more recently, the late bureaucratic societies of Eastern Europe) have been characterized by an ever-growing rationalization. Following Max Weber, we can distinguish three closely related aspects of this:

1) *Zweckrationalität*, or the rationality-of-ends, that is, the utilization of rational means to attain objectives that are not at all rational themselves. Bureaucracy is the ideal-typical institutional expression of this pattern. This is what the Frankfurt School referred to as instrumental rationality, a type of *ratio* compatible with the most monstrous substantive irrationalities — the rational-bureaucratic administration of genocide, for instance, to take the limiting case. But apart from such extremes, as Ernest Mandel has pointed out, the combination of partial rationality with overall irrationality is intrinsic to the “normal” functioning of the capitalist economy and its bureaucratic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

2) The differentiation and autonomization of domains, resulting in the separation of the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. The market economy becomes a self-regulating system that is no longer “embedded” in the society (to use Polanyi’s famous expression), thereby escaping social, moral, or political control.

3) *Rechenhaftigkeit*, or the spirit of rational calculation and the general tendency to quantification. This tendency finds its most direct

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\*Translated by K.P. Mosely. Quotes have been translated but the cited texts are the originals.

<sup>1</sup>Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money: A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 182.

expression in the monetarization of social relations and the unchecked dominion of the exchange-value of commodities; through its action, qualitative, ethical, social, and ecological values are inexorably eroded, jettisoned, or destroyed.

Today, under the auspices of such institutions as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the G-7, the rational “pursuit of maximum profit,” along with the globalization process, have achieved a truly planetary scale for the working out of these tendencies. Unfortunately, the neo-liberal Europe of Maastricht has not escaped this logic.

The first critics of the capitalist-industrial model of civilization were the Romantics. From Rousseau in the second half of the 18th century to contemporary critics (such as the English historian, E.P. Thompson), Romanticism, through affirmation of precapitalist cultural, social, or ethical values, has protested the quantification, mechanization, and disenchantment of the world of capital.

In the course of the history of Romanticism, the nostalgia for a lost paradise and for premodern organic communities has taken forms that have sometimes been backward-looking and retrograde, sometimes revolutionary and utopian. In the latter case, it is no longer a question of a return to the past, but of a *detour*, through the past towards the future. For Pierre Leroux, William Morris, or Herbert Marcuse, to name a few, the future utopia allows recovery of lost community, but in a new guise, incorporating as well the achievements of modernity: liberty, equality, fraternity, and democracy.

Socialism and political ecology (or at least, certain tendencies they contain) are, each in its own way, heirs to the Romantic critique. They share the goal of going beyond instrumental rationality, the reign of quantification, and production as an end in itself. They insist upon a society beyond the autonomization of the economy, the dominion of money, and the reduction of the social universe to the calculation of profit and the accumulation of capital. Instead, they posit qualitative values: use value and the satisfaction of needs. One may emphasize social equality; the other, the preservation of nature and ecological equilibrium. But both conceive of the economy as “embedded” in the social and natural environment.

That said, fundamental differences have so far divided the “reds” and the “greens,” the Marxists and the ecologists. One important question concerns a frequent accusation made by ecologists, that Marx and Engels were infatuated with capitalist production. This charge of “productivism” admits of a number of interpretations.

From one aspect it is entirely unjustified. For no one condemned the capitalist logic of production for the sake of production, or the accumulation of capital, wealth, and goods as ends in themselves, more than Marx. The very notion of socialism (never realized by its miserable bureaucratic avatars) is founded on the production of *use values*, of goods required for the satisfaction of human needs. For Marx, the final purpose of technical progress is not “having” (the infinite growth of possessions), but “being” (beginning with the reduction of the work day and an expansion of free time).

Nevertheless, one often finds in Marx and Engels (and even more in later Marxism) an uncritical attitude towards those aspects of industrial civilization that have contributed to its destructive relationship to the environment. This has chiefly appeared as a tendency to make the “development of the productive forces” the principal vector of progress. The “canonical” text for this point of view is the famous *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), one of Marx’s writings most permeated by a certain evolutionism, by the philosophy of progress, by scientism (that is, a valorization of the natural science model), and by an utterly unproblematic vision of the productive forces.

In reality, there is evidence for both interpretations in the writings of Marx and Engels. The following passage from the *Grundrisse* is a good example of Marx’s uncritical admiration for the “civilizing” effect of capitalist production, including its brutal instrumentalization of nature:

Thus, production based on capital creates, on the one hand, [universal] industry...surplus labor...creation of value; on the other, general exploitation of...nature and man....Creation of bourgeois society, universal appropriation of nature...incorporating all members of the society: *such is the great civilizing effect of capital.* (italic added)

It rises to such a [high] social level that all previous societies appear as purely *local developments* of mankind and as *nature-worshippers*....Nature becomes a...useful object...no longer a power....Knowledge of natural laws...submitting nature to human needs,

whether as object of consumption or as means of production. (*italic added*)<sup>2</sup>

However, there is *also* a certain number of passages by Marx and Engels that show a more critical vision of the “productive forces.” For example, in the *German Ideology* one finds the following statement:

In the development of the productive forces, it comes to a stage where productive forces...emerge that in the context of the existing [social] relations can only be negative, no longer productive but destructive... (mechanization and money)...<sup>3</sup>

This idea is not developed by Marx, and it is not clear if the destruction in question includes the destruction of nature. One example in which this is the case is the well-known passage on capitalist agriculture in *Capital*, where we find a dialectical vision of the inherent contradictions of the “progress” created by the productive forces, along with explicit reference to the havoc wreaked by capital on the natural environment:

Thus it destroys both the physical health of the urban worker and the spiritual life of the rural worker. Every stage in the development of capitalist agriculture, each short-term advance in fertility, represents at the same time a stage in the destruction of the long-term basis of this fertility. The more a country develops... large-scale industry (US for example), the more rapidly this destructive process moves forward. Capitalist production thus only develops...by at the same time exhausting the two springs from which flow all wealth: the land and the laborer.<sup>4</sup>

Even with Engels, who so often applauded the human “mastery” and “domination” of nature, one finds writings that call very explicit attention to the dangers of such a stance. Consider, for example, the following passage from the essay, “The role of work in the transformation of monkey to man” (1876):

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx, *Fondements de la Critique de l'Economie Politique* (Paris: Anthropos, 1967), pp. 366-67.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *L'Idéologie allemande* (Paris: Editions Sociales), pp. 67-68.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, trans. Joseph Roy (Paris: Editions Sociales), tome 1, pp. 360-61.

We should not boast overmuch of our human victories over nature. For each of these victories, nature takes its revenge....The peoples of Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor...who destroyed the forests to create arable land, never imagined that...they were creating the condition for the present desolate state of this land. The Italians of the Alps cut the forests....they had no idea...they destroyed the basis for the dairy industry...even...depriving their mountain springs of water....We must always remember that we can never rule nature...as a ruler over conquered people, as if outside of nature....we belong to it body and soul...all our domination rests on the advantage we have over other creatures in knowing its laws and being able to use them wisely.<sup>5</sup>

It would not be difficult to find other examples. It remains the case, however, that Marx and Engels do not possess an overall ecological perspective. Indeed, their optimistic conception of the unlimited development of the productive forces which is to take place once these are freed from the trammels of capitalist production relations, is no longer defensible today. Not only from the strictly economic point of view (given the risk of resource depletion), but more fundamentally, in view of the threat posed to the earth's ecological equilibrium by the productivist logic of capital (or of that represented by its poor imitation, the late "socialist" bureaucracies).

One might provisionally conclude this discussion with the very pertinent suggestion advanced in the recent — and remarkable — study of Marx by Daniel Bensäid. As Bensäid observes, it would be as unjustified to exonerate Marx from the "progressivist" or "Promethean" illusions of his time as it would be to make him the evangelist of an unfettered industrialism. Instead, he suggests a much more promising tack: to move right in with Marx's contradictions, and take them fully to heart — in particular, that between the productivist credo announced in certain texts and the intuition that progress may cause irreversible environmental harm.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is the ecological question, in my view, that poses the *major challenge* to a renewal of Marxist

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<sup>5</sup>Friedrich Engels, *La dialectique de la nature* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1968), pp. 180-81.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Bensaid, *Marx l'intempestif* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 347.

thought. It demands a thorough and critical revision of the traditional Marxist conception of the “productive forces,” and implied by this, a radical break with the technological and economic paradigm of modern industrial civilization and with the ideology of progress.

Walter Benjamin was one of the first Marxists of the 20th century to raise this kind of question. As early as 1928, in his book, *Sens Unique*, he denounced the notion of dominating nature as an “imperialist idea,” putting forward, instead, a new conception of technology as “mastery of the relationship between nature and humanity.” Several years later, in his *Theses sur le concept d’histoire*, he suggests enriching historical materialism with the ideas of Fourier, that utopian visionary who had dreamed of a new form of labor that “far from exploiting nature, can bring life to the creations that lie dormant in her womb.”<sup>7</sup>

Even today, Marxism is far from having corrected its shortcomings in this respect. But certain lines of analysis have begun to tackle the problem, notably, the “Marxist-Polanyist,” James O’Connor, with his fruitful suggestion that we add to the first contradiction of capitalism — the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, examined by Marx — a second contradiction, between the forces of production and the *conditions of production* (nature, workers, urban space). Capital, by virtue of its expansionist dynamic, endangers or destroys its own conditions of existence, beginning with the natural environment — a possibility that Marx had not taken sufficiently into consideration.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Sens Unique* (Paris: Lettres Nouvelles/Maurice Nadeau, 1978), p. 243, and “Theses sur la philosophie de l’histoire,” in *L’homme, le langage et la culture* (Paris: Denoel, 1971), p. 190. One might also mention the Austrian socialist, Julius Dickmann, author of a pioneering essay of 1933. In his view, socialism would not result from a “dramatic take-off of the productive forces,” but rather, would be a necessity imposed by the “shrinking of the reservoir of natural resources” being depleted by capital. The “heedless” development of the productive forces by capitalism undermines the very conditions of existence of the human species. “La véritable limite de la production capitaliste,” *La Critique sociale*, 9, September, 1933.

<sup>8</sup>James O’Connor, “La seconde contradiction du capitalisme: causes et conséquences,” special issue on “L’écologie, ce matérialisme historique,” *Actuel Marx*, 12, 1992, pp. 30, 36.

A recent work by the Italian “eco-Marxist,” Tiziano Bagarolo, builds on the passage in *The German Ideology* cited above to suggest another interesting approach:

The formula that posits a transformation of potentially productive forces into effectively destructive forces, particularly with respect to the environment, seems to us more appropriate and significant than the well-known schema of the contradiction between (dynamic) productive forces and production relations (that hold them back). Besides, this formula opens the way to a critical and non-apologetic foundation for economic, technological, and scientific development, and thus to the elaboration of a “differentiated” concept of progress (E. Bloch).<sup>9</sup>

Whether Marxist or not, the traditional labor movement in Europe — unions, social-democratic parties, and Communists — remains profoundly imprinted by productivism and the ideology of “progress.” In some cases, labor even goes so far as to defend nuclear energy or the automobile industry, without asking the necessary questions as to their effects on the global ecology. Nonetheless, the beginnings of an ecological consciousness is taking shape (particularly in the Nordic countries, Spain, and Germany) in the unions and parties of the left.

The great contribution of ecology has been to make us aware of the dangers that threaten the planet as a result of the current mode of production and consumption: the exponential growth of pollution of the water, earth, and air, the massive extinction of living species, the desertification of fertile lands, the build-up of dangerous nuclear wastes, the constant threat of new Chernobyls, the destruction of forests at a dizzying pace, the greenhouse effect, and possible rupture of the ozone layer, with catastrophic effects on all organic life. Together, these create a doomsday scenario that puts in question the very survival of humanity. We are confronted, in fact, with a *civilizational crisis* that requires radical change.

If socialist thought fails to address this through its residual productivism, the proposals advanced by political ecology tend to exemplify another dimension of inadequacy. Here the major weakness has been to ignore the essential connection between productivism and capitalism. This approach leads to the illusion of a “clean capitalism,”

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<sup>9</sup>Tiziano Bagarolo, “Encore sur marxisme et ecologie,” *Quatrieme Internationale*, 44 , Mai-Juillet, 1992, p. 25.

or of the possibility of controlling its “excesses” with “eco-taxes” or other reforms. Alternatively, on the grounds that bureaucratic command economies simply imitated Western productivism, most political ecologists lump capitalism and socialism together as variants of the same model — an argument that, with the disintegration of the supposed “real existing socialism,” has lost much of its power.

The ecologists deceive themselves if they imagine they can do without a Marxist critique of capitalism. An ecology that does not take account of the relationship between “productivism” and the profit motive is doomed to failure — or worse, to cooptation by the system. There is no lack of examples.

Considering the workers as irremediably given over to productivism, certain ecologists simply ignore the labor movement, raising the banner of “neither left nor right.” Ex-Marxists converted to ecology hastily bid “farewell to the working class,” while others insist that one must abandon the “red” (Marxism and socialism, that is) to join the “green,” the new paradigm that should resolve all economic and social problems.

Finally, in what are called “fundamentalist” circles or *deep ecology*, a certain rejection of humanism — supposedly to combat “anthropocentrism” — is taking shape. This leads to a relativist position in which all living species are put on the same level. But must we really believe that the Koch bacillus or the anopheles mosquito has the same right to life as a child afflicted with tuberculosis or malaria?

Clearly, an *eco-socialist* alternative needs to be developed in order to avoid these pitfalls. Incorporating the fundamental insights of Marxism — while discarding its productivist dross — eco-socialism understands that the logic of profit and the market (like that of the techno-bureaucratic authoritarianism of the defunct “popular democracies”) is incompatible with ecological needs. While criticizing the prevailing ideological tendencies of the labor movement, it knows that the workers and their organizations are essential partners in any radical systemic change.

Building on the work of several late 19th- and early 20th-century Russian pioneers like Serge Podolinsky and Vladimir Vernadsky, such an eco-socialism has begun to emerge in the course of the last 25 years. It is indebted to thinkers of such stature as Manuel Sacristan, Raymond Williams, and Rudolf Bahro and Andre Gorz (in their early writings), as well as to the valuable recent contributions of James O’Connor, Barry Commoner, Ted Benton, Juan Martinez Alier, Francisco Fernandez Buey, Jorge Riechman, Jean-Paul Deleage, Jutta Dittfurth, Thomas



Ebermann, Ranier Trampert, Erhard Eppler, Elmar Altvater, Frieder Otto Wolf, and many others, featured in various journals such as *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, Ecologie Politique*, and others.

The eco-socialist tendency is found in the green parties and the “green-red” movements, on the far left, and even in the bosom of the “classic” left. Although hardly homogeneous politically, most of its spokespeople share certain common themes. Breaking with the productivist ideology of progress (in its capitalist and/or “real socialist” bureaucratic forms), and opposing the infinite expansion of a mode of production and consumption that destroys the environment, eco-socialism represents the most advanced wing of the ecological camp. This is reflected in its sensitivity to the interests of the workers and the peoples of the South, as well as through its radical rejection of the notion of “sustainable development” within a capitalist market framework.

The eco-socialist rationale rests on two essential arguments:

1. The current mode of production and consumption, based on a logic of unlimited accumulation (of goods, profits, and capital), on ostentatious consumption, waste of resources, and accelerated destruction of the environment, can never be extended to the planet as a whole without causing a major ecological crisis. According to recent estimates, for instance, if the average energy consumption of the United States was generalized to the whole population of the world, known petroleum reserves would be exhausted in *19 days*.<sup>10</sup> The economic system is thus predicated on the maintenance and exacerbation of a blatant inequality between North and South.

Moreover, due to a deliberate policy of “exportation of pollution” by the imperialist countries, neo-liberal globalization is intensifying the ecological problems of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This strategy has even received a penultimate economic “legitimation” (from the capitalist point of view), recently formulated by the eminent World Bank expert (later to become the US Secretary of the Treasury and President of Harvard), Lawrence Summers: the poor cost less! To cite his own words: “the measure of the costs of pollution harmful to health depends on the output lost because of increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given quantity of pollution harmful to health should be concentrated in countries with the lowest costs, that is the

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<sup>10</sup>M. Mies, “Liberacion del consumo o politizacion de la vida cotidiana,” *Mientras Tanto* (Barcelona), 48, 1992, p. 73.

countries with the lowest salaries.”<sup>11</sup> This cynical formulation reveals much more about the logic of global capital than all the soothing speeches about “development” produced by the international financial institutions.

2. In any case, the ongoing reproduction of capitalist “progress” and market society — even in this brutally inegalitarian form — directly threatens, however hazardous the prediction, the very survival of the human species in the short or medium term. The safeguard of the natural environment is thus a humanist imperative as well.

The narrow rationality of the market, with its short-term calculations of profit and loss, and ecological rationality, which takes into account the full duration of natural cycles, are inherently contradictory. Neo-liberalism lends its support to the prevailing fetishism of commodities and the reified autonomization of the economy. For eco-socialists, on the other hand, what is essential is the inauguration of a “moral economy,” in E.P. Thompson’s meaning of the term: that is, a political economy founded on extra-economic, non-monetary criteria. To put it another way, the economic is to be re-embedded back into the ecological, the social, and the political.<sup>12</sup>

Partial reforms are totally inadequate. A social and ecological macro-rationality must replace the micro-rationality of profit — something that demands a veritable *civilizational change*.<sup>13</sup> This is impossible without a profound technological reorientation, whose foundation is the replacement of current sources of energy with non-

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. “Let Them Eat Pollution,” *The Economist*, February 8, 1992. Another striking example: a Working Group of the Intergovernmental Workshop on Climate Change, in a meeting at Geneva in July 1995 discussed a report which asked if it was “cost-effective” to take measures against the greenhouse effect, considering that the effects will be felt above all in the poor countries. According to the experts, the cost of a life in a rich country is \$1.5 million, in a poor country, only \$100,000. See Derek Lovejoy, “Limits to Growth?” *Science and Society*, special issue on “Marxism and Ecology,” Fall, 1996, p. 274.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Daniel Bensaid, *Marx l’intempestif: grandeurs et miseres d’une aventure critique* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), pp. 385-86, 396; Jorge Reichman, *Problemas con los frenos de emergencia?* (Madrid: Editorial Revolucion, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup>On this point, see the remarkable essay by Jorge Riechman, “El socialismo puede llegar solo en bicicleta,” *Papales de la Fondation de Investigaciones Marxistas* (Madrid), 6, 1996.

polluting and renewable alternatives, such as solar energy.<sup>14</sup> Control over the means of production, especially over decisions concerning investments and technological change must be thoroughly reorganized according to *non-market criteria* encompassing the real needs of the population (for which there may be inadequate “effective demand”) and the protection of the environment. The only possible ground for this can be a democratic choice of priorities and investments by the population itself — rather than the “laws of the market” or an omniscient politburo.

In sum, we envision *an economy of transition to eco-socialism*, re-embedded, as Polanyi would put it, in the social and natural environment. The transition is to an alternative way of life, to a new civilization, beyond the rule of money and the artificial consumption habits created by advertising, beyond the unlimited production of commodities, such as the automobile, that harm the environment.

A utopia? In the etymological sense of “no place,” then surely. But — unless one agrees with Hegel, that “all that is real is rational, and all that is rational is real” — how can we even conceive of a more substantive rationality without resorting to utopias? On condition that it be based on real contradictions and real social movements, utopia is an indispensable element of social change. This is the case with eco-socialism, which proposes a strategy of alliance between the “reds” and the “greens,” the labor and ecological movements, and of solidarity with the oppressed and exploited of the South.

This alliance could find its first strategic site in Europe, where the two movements, red and green, are active, and the barriers that separate them are beginning to fall. But this assumes that ecology can give up its naturalist and anti-humanist proclivities, along with its pretensions to do without, or even replace, a critique of political economy. Marxism, on its side, must give up its productivism, its mechanistic schema of opposition between the (developing) forces of production and the (restrictive) relations of production. The convergence with ecology requires, instead, the much more fruitful conception of forces that are potentially productive being transformed into forces that are effectively destructive, and vice versa.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that green socialism or a solar communism must be posited as a revolutionary utopia does not mean that we should not act

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<sup>14</sup>Some Marxists are already dreaming of a “solar communism,” David Schwartzman, “Solar Communism,” *Science and Society*, Fall, 1996.

<sup>15</sup>Bensaid, *op cit.*, pp. 391, 396.

— and *starting now*. Recognizing the impossibility of “ecologizing” capitalism does not mean that we should not engage in the struggle for *immediate reforms*. Certain types of eco-taxes, for example, might be useful, on condition that they be informed by an egalitarian social logic (that it is the polluters, not the consumers, who should pay), and that one give up the myth that the “market price” of ecological damage can be calculated in economic terms (these are *incommensurable* variables from a monetary point of view). We have a desperate need to make up for lost time, to struggle *immediately* for a ban on the CFCs that destroy the ozone layer, for severe restrictions on the gas emissions that cause the greenhouse effect, and for the promotion of public transportation as opposed to the polluting and anti-social individual passenger car.<sup>16</sup>

The struggle for eco-social reforms could spark a new dynamic of change, a transition from minimal to maximal programs and demands — but only on condition that one eschew the arguments and pressures deployed by the dominant interests in the name of “competitiveness,” “modernization,” and “market laws.”

Certain immediate demands are already, or may rapidly become, points of convergence between “reds” and “greens.” These include:

- the promotion of free or inexpensive public transportation — trains, subways, buses, trams — as an alternative to the asphyxiation and pollution of the cities and countrysides by the road transport system and passenger cars;
- the struggle against the system of ultra-liberal “adjustment” and debt imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on the countries of the South, and with such dramatic social and ecological consequences: massive unemployment and destruction of social safety nets; abandonment of food crops and destruction of natural resources, in favor of exports;
- the protection of public health from the pollution of the air, the ground water, or the food supply (by-products of the greed of large-scale capitalist enterprise);

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<sup>16</sup>Jorge Reichmann, “Necesitamos una reforma fiscal guiada por criterios igualitarios y ecologicos,” *De la economia a la ecologia* (Madrid: Editorial, 1995), pp. 82-85.

- the reduction of work time, both as a solution to unemployment and as an expression of a larger social vision, one placing greater value on free time than on the accumulation of goods<sup>17</sup>

In the struggle for a new civilization, however, it is the entire array of emancipatory social movements that need to be inter-linked. As Reichmann puts it so well:

This project must not reject any of the colors of the rainbow: neither the red of the anticapitalist and egalitarian labor movement, the pink of the women's liberation struggle, the white of the non-violent peace movements, nor the black anti-authoritarianism of the libertarians and anarchists, still less the green of the struggle for a just and free humanity on a habitable planet.<sup>18</sup>

This is a truly planetary cause. But Europe, if it can escape the neo-liberal straight-jacket of Maastricht and reunite around new goals, can become a major crucible of change, working to recast the future in a different mold.

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<sup>17</sup>See Pierre Rousset, "Convergence de combats. L'écologique et le social," *Rouge*, Mai 16, 1996, pp. 8-9.

<sup>18</sup>Reichmann, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 57.