

## **COMMENTARY**

### **On the People's Declaration from Klimaforum09**

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The People's Declaration from Klimaforum09 is an excellent critique of the existing state of affairs and the comrades whose efforts are behind this document are to be highly complimented and supported. Below are a few reservations that do not in any way contradict the main points of the Declaration and hopefully will only serve to strengthen it. The first are related to how environmental processes are understood, which has political implications. The last comments pertain to political strategies in particular.

The first concern is with how the rest of nature is thought and talked about. One example is with respect to the notion of balance. That there are high amounts of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) in the troposphere is not a case of imbalance, but a case of having weather effects and longer-term climatic effects that endanger many humans, some much more than others. CO<sub>2</sub> levels, for instance, rise and fall over the long term (they were arguably higher about 650,000 years ago) and the matter of balance is, to me, not only empirically tenuous as a concept, but also politically reactionary. Environments do not observe some preordained balance that coheres with human needs. Physical environments are indifferent to social systems. Empirically, evidence abounds that what is balanced at one scale is imbalanced at another (e.g., fire frequency and vegetation changes).<sup>1</sup> It is, in any case, not a matter of balance, but a matter of what ecological conditions allow people to live healthy lives.

More worrisome still is any claim that such climate "imbalance" results in famine and other horrors. Such a claim is directly contradicted in Part 3 of the Declaration, where inequalities in resource access and control are underlined (but the systematic nature in which this occurs, as part of capitalism as a mode of production, is problematically absent). But I would go a bit further. Climate change of the sort we are experiencing can only worsen the denial to the basic means of survival that has existed in authoritarian social systems like capitalism even prior to exaggerated GHG emissions. The recent food crises, for instance, have more to do with capitalist speculation on commodity futures, warfare, and major shifts in cultivation towards biofuel crops. And not everyone is suffering the outcomes of food shortages, even where the problem is manifested most severely. For instance, there are governments, like Madagascar, represented in the United Nations (more on this below), which are selling farmland access to foreign firms (and governments) and thereby displacing possibly thousands of peasants. Actions to reduce GHG emissions will not resolve food crises or other such mayhem meted out especially on the poorest.

Such a problematic take on the environment is also implied in the call for an end to deforestation in primary forests. The issue of primary forest is often a colonial construct, which deems other societies as primitive and incapable of altering ecosystems. But the

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Holling, "The Resilience of Terrestrial Ecosystems: Local Surprise and Global Change," in W.M. Clark, and R.E. Munn (eds.), *Sustainable Development in the Biosphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 292-320.

Amazon, for instance, is the product of at least hundreds of years of human intervention.<sup>2</sup> Instead of a ban, which would delegitimize hundreds of years of constructive impacts by peoples living off of “primary forests,” I would advocate for prioritizing the use of such forests in ways that have been proven to be ecologically sustainable (largely according to how indigenous peoples have been using them). In any case, it is quite difficult to tell primary from secondary forests apart, let alone what defines a forest. The matter is really about who has control of and access to what resources and on what basis. I would steer clear of arguments that will favor and reinforce the legitimacy of technocratic interventions.

Then there is the matter of connecting rising global average temperatures in the atmosphere to other environmental changes. One that I would like to highlight is the relationship with the magnitude and frequency of hurricanes and typhoons. Overall, it is correct to say that global average warming trends (but *not* an “imbalance of the climate system”) are directly related to “greater and more frequent extremes of ... tropical cyclones.” However, it is not just human-induced warming that has led to this situation. There are also climatic oscillations that have little to do with human-induced changes and that contribute at least a good third of the increasing intensity and frequency of hurricanes or typhoons.<sup>3</sup> And the link between GHG emissions and sea surface temperatures may not be as straightforward as one might be led to believe. It depends, for instance, on which index one uses to analyze the degree to which atmospheric warming is forcing higher sea surface temperatures.<sup>4</sup> The increasing intensity and number of tropical cyclones might also diminish over time, depending on whether regional climate shifts continue to promote favorable conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, one cannot treat the effects of rising temperatures as uniform. The distribution of harm across the world is highly uneven. It is not only because of imperialistically imposed greater vulnerability to disasters on the majority of humanity by the most powerful social institutions (e.g., the U.S. Federal Reserve, the banking sectors represented in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, NATO powers). The difference is also due to environmental processes. The North Atlantic Ocean, for instance,

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<sup>2</sup> Karl W. Butzer, “No Eden in the New World,” *Nature*, 362, 1993, pp. 15-16; William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82, 1992, pp. 69–85; John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto, *Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Political Ecology of Rainforest Destruction* (Oakland: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> B.D. Santer, T.M.L. Wigley, P.J. Gleckler, C. Bonfils, M.F. Wehner, K. AchutaRao, T.P. Barnett, J.S. Boyle, W. Brüggemann, M. Fiorino, N. Gillett, J.E. Hansen, P.D. Jones, S.A. Klein, G.A. Meehl, S.C.B. Raper, R.W. Reynolds, K.E. Taylor, and W.M. Washington, “Forced and Unforced Ocean Temperature Changes in Atlantic and Pacific Tropical Cyclogenesis Regions,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* (USA), Vol. 103, 2006, pp. 13905-13910.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Johnny C.L. Chan, “Thermodynamic Control on the Climate of Intense Tropical Cyclones,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society A*, Vol. 465, 2009, pp. 3011-3021. The problem of which indicator is used and which is more appropriate might be a valid point by Chan, but see also an earlier rebuttal to Chan by P.J. Webster, J.A. Curry, J. Liu, and G.J. Holland, “Response to Comment on ‘Changes in Tropical Cyclone Number, Duration, and Intensity in a Warming Environment,’” *Science*, Vol. 311, No. 5768, p. 1713. In that interchange, Chan claimed a lack of correspondence between typhoon intensity and sea surface temperatures, and the responding authors show Chan’s erroneous conclusion, which results from confusing longer- with shorter- term data.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Trenberth, “Uncertainty in Hurricanes and Global Warming,” *Science*, Vol. 308, 2005, No. 5729, pp. 1753-1754.

has been experiencing the least increase in the frequency of hurricanes.<sup>6</sup> This means that people suffering the consequences of ever mightier typhoons are being disproportionately affected as a result not only of direct human action (e.g., structural adjustment, GHG emissions), but also the fact that atmospheric and oceanic processes combine in ways that are beyond human control. Similar differing outcomes emerge in the case of droughts, flooding, and landslides, to name a few examples, and it is not always easy to tease out human from nonhuman factors.<sup>7</sup> This gives even more credence to precautionary principles and, in my view, points to the urgency of establishing social controls from below on what is developed technologically and what is emitted into environments, for example.

In any case, there should be greater and more detailed attention given to scientific findings to date, instead of presenting matters as definitively proven. This is also of political importance because if there are claims that are not based on sound empirical support, then inimical forces can and will use any poorly supported arguments to discredit alternative, anti-capitalist political formations. Let us be very careful about what is being claimed relative to existing confirmed evidence. Engaging and radicalizing natural scientists is one step towards preventing such a problem.

Aside from questions about some politically self-undermining notions on the environment, the ideas promoted by the Declaration should leave one with major concerns over political strategy. It is very disturbing to find that the Declaration fails to include other major forms of debt besides “environmental and climate debt.” As many have stressed, especially ecofeminists, there is an ongoing and growing social and embodied debt by the wealthy towards working classes and, generally, those that receive no compensation at all for their work—especially most women, Indigenous Peoples, peasants, and other communities whose unacknowledged activities are the backbone of the world capitalist economy.<sup>8</sup> Without a coordinated global struggle for the self-determination of the world’s meta-industrial laborers, as Ariel Salleh has put it, there will be little chance of mounting organized resistance from below. Debt repayment must include the world’s majority, as social and embodied debt repayment, if one wants to work towards incentives for most people worldwide to struggle for this crucial cause.

Finally, there is the matter of the role of the United Nations (UN). It should be evident to all that there is an inbuilt tension, if not contradiction, between striving to democratize the world’s economic order from below and supporting a network of highly unequal national states.<sup>9</sup> It is, after all, national states that are involved in making the very international economic order that has brought us to the current predicament. And national states are structurally anti-democratic, like states in general so far, which are also, almost by

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<sup>6</sup> Greg J. Holland and Peter J. Webster, “Heightened Tropical Cyclone Activity in the North Atlantic: Natural Variability or Climate Trend?,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, Vol. 365, 2007, pp. 2695-2716.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Hewitt (ed.), *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 3-32; Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability and Disasters* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For a useful short overview, see Harold Brookfield, “Environmental Damage: Distinguishing Human from Geophysical Causes,” *Environmental Hazards*, Vol. 1, 1999, pp. 3-11.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ariel Salleh, *Eco-sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> National states are here understood as state forms peculiar to capitalism, following, among others, Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

definition, closed groups of and/or answerable to powerful ruling classes. This does not mean abandoning any strategy that involves political engagement within governments and supra-statal organizations like the UN. But the viability of such strategy and its compatibility with political projects from below must be considered as an open question, to be debated, rather than assumed as resolved, as in the Declaration. There is much at stake in this, including what sort of social institutions can be used or need to be created to have environmental debts paid and to formulate and implement alternatives. In other words, striving for system change sits uneasily with efforts that reinforce the very same system, which is comprised of authoritarian and, to differing degrees, violently coercive social institutions, as the Danish government unsurprisingly exemplified through the mass arrests of protesters and targeting of organizers, among other repressive measures.

I hope that these critiques are not taken negatively, as they are meant in a most comradely of intent. The Declaration, regardless of its faults, remains an impressive and important document, one that, in my view, can lead to more lucid reflection and open debate about organizing and political interventions.