

# **Which Politics are Necessary in the Age of Ecological Crisis?**

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**Abstract:** The dominant politics of today are the politics at the service of the accumulation of capital, and the maximization of profit. The politics of almost all governments and mainstream parties, are “politics as usual” – the political equivalent of “business as usual” in the economic area. These politics are leading humanity, with increasing speed, to a catastrophe without precedent: climate change. There is a desperate need for a radically different sort of politics, a political program and a political strategy which take into account the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the dramatic threat it represents for human life on this planet. This paper discusses the possibilities of radical political alternatives to our present situation.

**Keywords:** politics, eco-socialism, humanity, catastrophes.

Politics are always possible! As long as there are human societies, there are politics...For the best and the worse.

The question should rather be: which politics should we have today? Which politics are necessary in the age of ecological crisis – or catastrophe?

The dominant politics of today are the politics at the service of the accumulation of capital, and the maximization of profit. The politics of almost all governments and mainstream parties, are “politics as usual” – the political equivalent of “business as usual” in the economic area. These politics are leading humanity, with increasing speed, to a catastrophe without precedent: climate change. There is a desperate need for a radically different sort of politics, a political program and a political strategy which take into account the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the dramatic threat it represents for human life on this planet.

We need *radical political alternatives*. “Radical” comes from the Latin word *radix*, “the root”; radical politics are those who deal with the root of the problem: the modern capitalist civilization, the dominant economic and political system, on global scale. Radical politics are therefore anti-capitalist, anti-systemic ones.

Ecosocialism is a political current based on an essential insight: the preservation of the ecological equilibrium of the planet and therefore, of an environment favorable to living species – including ours – is incompatible with the expansive and destructive logic of the capitalist system. The pursuit of “progress” and “growth” under the aegis of capital will lead us, in short range - the next decades – to a catastrophe without precedent in human history: global warming.

James Hansen, NASA’s chief climatologist, one of the greatest world specialists on the issue of climate change – the Bush administration tried, in vain, to prevent him from publishing his investigations - wrote this in the first paragraph of his book *Storms of*

my Grandchildren. The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity (2009) : “Planet Earth, creation, the world in which civilization developed, the world with climate patterns that we know and stable shorelines, is in imminent peril. The urgency of the situation crystallized only in the past few years. We have now clear evidence of the crisis (...). The startling conclusion is that continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself – and the timetable is shorter than we thought ». <sup>1</sup>

This understanding is largely shared, across lands and continents. In a well-informed essay, *How the Rich Destroy the Planet*, the French ecologist Hervé Kempf gives us a true picture of the disaster being prepared: beyond a certain threshold, which may arrive much sooner as predicted, the climate system may runaway in an irreversible way; one cannot exclude a sudden and brutal change, with temperature rising by several degrees, attaining unbearable levels. Faced with this knowledge, confirmed by the scientists, and shared by millions of citizens around the world, what are doing the powerful, the oligarchy of billionaires that rules world economy? The social system that presently dominates human societies, capitalism, blindly and stubbornly resists the changes that are indispensable if one wishes to preserve for human existence its dignity. A predatory and greedy ruling class refuses any attempt of an effective transformation; almost all the spheres of power and influence are submitted to a pseudo-realism that pretends that any alternative is impossible and that the only way forward is “growth”. This oligarchy, obsessed by conspicuous consumption – as already described by Thorstein Veblen many years ago – is indifferent to the degradation of living conditions for the majority of human beings and blind to the seriousness of the biosphere’s poisoning.<sup>2</sup>

The planetary ecological crisis, which is a crisis of civilization, has its most threatening expression in the phenomena of global warming. Result of the accumulation of greenhouse gases - mainly carbon dioxide – released on the atmosphere by fossil fuels – oil, coal – the process of climate change is a challenge without precedent in the history of humanity. What will happen if the temperature of the planet rises above 2° C? The risks are known, thanks to the works of the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: rise in the level of the seas, with the risk of submerging most maritime towns of human civilisation, from Dacca in Bangladesh to Amsterdam, Venice or New York. Desertification in gigantic scale: the Saharian desert could arrive

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen 2009, p. IX.

<sup>2</sup> Kempf 2008. See also his other important book Kempf 2009.

till Rome. Lack of drinking water. “Natural” catastrophes – hurricanes, inundations, etc. – with growing frequency and intensity. One could continue with the list. At which temperature - 5, 6 or 7° C - will the planet cease to be inhabitable by our species? Unfortunately, we do not dispose at the moment of a replacement planet in the existing universe known to the astronomers...

What is highly worrying is that this process of global warming is taking place at a much faster pace than predicted. The accumulation of carbon dioxide, the rise in temperature, the melting of the polar ice and of the “eternal snow” of the mountains, the droughts, the inundations: everything is happening very quickly, and the balance-sheets of the scientists, as soon as the ink of the documents has dried, appear already to optimistic. One doesn’t talk anymore of what will happen by 2100, but of what is waiting us in the next ten, twenty, thirty years.

The “politics as usual” of the planet’s “decision makers” – billionaires, managers, bankers, investors, ministers, business executives, and “experts” – are shaped by the short-sighted and narrow-minded rationality of the system. Obsessed by the imperatives of growth and expansion, the struggle for market positions, competitiveness and the margins of profit, they seem to follow the precept proclaimed by the King Louis XV a few years before the French Revolution: “After me, the Flood”. The Flood of the 21 century may take the form, like the one in the Biblical mythology, of an inexorable rise of the waters, drowning under the waves the coastal towns of human civilization.

The spectacular failure of all international conferences on climate change – Copenhagen, Paris, Glasgow – illustrates this voluntary blindness: the greatest polluters, beginning with the US, China, Canada and Australia, refuse any commitment to a substantial reduction of CO2 emissions. The weak measures taken so far by the more “enlightened” capitalist governments – the Kyoto agreements, and the European climate-action package, with their “flexibility mechanisms” and emission trade schemes – are quite unable to confront the dramatic challenge of climate change. The same applies to the “technological” solutions privileged by the US and the European Union: “electric cars”, “agro-fuels”, “clean carbon”, and so on. As Marx predicted in *The German Ideology*, productive forces in capitalism are becoming destructive forces, creating the risk of physical annihilation for millions of human beings – a scenario even worse than the “tropical holocausts” of the 19th century, studied by Mike Davis.

One word about another marvelous, “clean and secure” technology, favored not only by the powers that be but also, unfortunately, by some ecologists as an alternative to fossil resources: nuclear energy... After the terrifying accident of Chernobyl (1986), the Western atomic lobby had found the answer: this is the result of the bureaucratic, incompetent and inefficient management of nuclear plants in the Soviet Union. “Such

a thing couldn't happen among us". Well, after the recent accident in Fukushima (2011), this kind of argument lost all currency: TEPCO, the owners of the Japanese nuclear plant, were one of the largest private capitalist enterprises in the country. The fact is that insecurity is inherent to nuclear energy: accidents are statistically inevitable. Sooner or later, new Chernobyl's and new Fukushima's, will take place, provoked by human errors, internal disfunctions, earth-quakes, tsunamis, airplane accidents, or other unpredictable events. Moreover, if one wishes to replace fossil-fueled plants by nuclear ones on a world scale, this would mean the building of hundreds of new such plants, increasing inevitably the probability of more accidents.

What is the alternative solution? What politics could confront the challenge? Individual asceticism and penitence, as so many ecologists seem to propose? The drastic reduction of consumption? The cultural criticism of consumerism is necessary but insufficient: one has to challenge the *mode of production* itself. Only a collective and democratic reorganization of the productive system could, at the same time, satisfy the real social needs, reduce labor time, suppress useless and/or dangerous productions, replace fossil energies by renewable ones. All this requires deep incursions in capitalist propriety, a radical extension of the public sector, and of gratuity, in one word, a democratic eco-socialist plan.

The central premise of eco-socialist politics, already suggested by the term itself, is that a non-ecological socialism is a dead-end, and a non-socialist ecology is unable to confront the present ecological crisis. The eco-socialist proposition of combining the "red" – the Marxist critique of capital and the project of an alternative society – and the "green", the ecological critique of productivism, has nothing to do with the so-called "red-green" governmental coalitions between social-democrats and certain Green parties, on the basis of a social-liberal program of capitalist management. Eco-socialism distinguishes itself both from the productivist varieties of socialism in the 20th century – either social-democracy or the Stalinist brand of "communism" – as from the ecological currents that accommodate themselves, in one way or another, to the capitalist system. It is radical political proposition that aims not only at the transformation of the relations of production, of the productive apparatus and of the dominant consumption patterns, but to create a new way of life, a new civilizational paradigm, breaking with the foundations of the modern Western capitalist/industrial civilization.

Eco-socialism is an attempt to provide a radical political alternative, based on the arguments of the ecological movement, and on the Marxist critique of political economy. It opposes to the capitalist destructive progress (Marx) a policy founded on non-monetary criteria: the social needs and the ecological equilibrium. It is at the same time a critique of "market ecology, which does not challenge the capitalist system, and of "productivist socialism", which ignores the issue of natural limits.

Democratic ecological planning, where the main decisions are taken by the population itself – and not by “the market” or by a Politburo – is one of the key dimensions of eco-socialism.

In the Great Transition to this new way of life, to a new mode of production and consumption, entire sectors of the productive system are to be suppressed - beginning with the fossil energies responsible for climate change – or restructured, new ones have to be developed, under the necessary condition of full employment for all the labour force, in equal conditions of work and wage. This condition is essential, not only because it is a requirement of social justice, but in order to assure the workers support for the process of structural transformation of the productive forces. This process is impossible without public control over the means of production, and planning, i.e. public decisions on investment and technological change, which must be taken away from the banks and capitalist enterprises in order to serve society's common good.

Society itself, and not a small oligarchy of property-owners – nor an elite of techno-bureaucrats – of will be able to choose, democratically, which productive lines are to be privileged, and how much resources are to be invested in education, health or culture. The prices of goods themselves would not be left to the “laws of offer and demand” but, to some extent, determined according to social and political options, as well as ecological criteria, leading to taxes on certain products, and subsidized prices for others. Ideally, as the transition to socialism moves forward, more and more products and services would be distributed free of charge, according to the will of the citizens. Far from being “despotic” in itself, planning is the exercise, by a whole society, of its freedom: freedom of decision, and liberation from the alienated and reified “economic laws” of the capitalist system, which determined the individuals' life and death, and enclosed them in an economic “iron cage” (Max Weber). Planning and the reduction of labor time are the two decisive steps of humanity towards what Marx called “the kingdom of freedom”. A significant increase of free time is in fact a condition for the democratic participation of the working people in the democratic discussion and management of economy and of society.

A few words on the history of eco-socialism. They concern mainly the eco-Marxist tendency, but one can find in Murray Bookchin's *Anarchist Social Ecology*, in Arne Naess leftist version of *Deep Ecology*, and among certain “degrowth” authors (Giorgio Kallis), radically anti-capitalist analysis and alternative solutions that are not too far from eco-socialism.

The idea of an ecological socialism – or a socialist ecology – didn't start really to develop until the 1970's, when it appears, under different forms, in the writings of certain pioneers of a “Red-Green” way of thinking: Manuel Sacristan (Spain), Raymond Williams (UK), André Gorz and Jean-Paul Déleage (France), Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner (US), Wolfgang Harich (German Democratic Republic) and others. The word

“eco-socialism” apparently began to be used mainly after the 1980's when appeared, in the German Green Party, a leftist tendency which designated itself as “eco-socialist”; its main spokespersons were Rainer Trampert and Thomas Ebermann. At the same time appears the book *The Alternative*, by an East-German dissident, Rudolf Bahor, which develops a radical critique of the Soviet and GDR model, in the name of an ecological socialism. During the 1980's the US economist James O'Connor will develop in his writings a new Marxist ecological approach, and create the *Journal Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*. During the same years Frieder Otto Wolf, Member of the European Parliament, and one of the main leaders of the left-wing of the German Green Party, will write, together with Pierre Juquin, a former French Communist leader converted to the Red-Green perspective, a book called *Europe's Green Alternative*, (Montréal, 1992, Black Rose), a sort of first eco-socialist European program. Meanwhile, in Spain, followers of Manuel Sacristan such as Francisco Fernandez Buey, will develop, in the *Barcelona Journal Mientras Tanto*, socialist ecological arguments. In 2001, a Marxist/revolutionary current present in several countries, the Fourth International (founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938), will adopt an eco-socialist resolution, *Ecology and Socialist Revolution*, at its World Congress. In the same year, Joel Kovel and the author of this essay will publish an *International Eco-socialist Manifesto*, which will be widely discussed. A *Second Eco-Socialist Manifesto*, discussing global warming, the *Belem Declaration*, signed by hundreds of persons from dozens of countries, will be distributed at the *World Social Forum* in Belem, State of Para, Brazil, in 2009. A few months later, during the UN International Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen, eco-socialists will issue an illustrated comic-strip, *Copenhagen 2049*, among the 100 thousand demonstrators under the banner “Change the System, not the Climate!”. In 2020, eco-socialists from several countries founded the *Global Ecosocialist Network*.

To this one has to add, in the US, the work of John Bellamy Foster, Fred Magdoff, Paul Burkett and their friends from the well-known North-American left *Journal Monthly Review*, who argue for a Marxist ecology; the continued activity of *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*, under the editorship of Joel Kovel, the author of *The Enemy of Nature* (2002), and, more recently, of Salvatore Engel Di Mauro; the young circle of activists called *Eco-socialist Horizons* (Quincy Saul), who recently edited an eco-socialist comic-strip *Truth and Dare* (2014); not to mention many important books, among which one of the most inclusive is Chris Williams *Ecology and Socialism* (2010). Equally important, in other countries: the eco-socialist/eco-feminist writings of Ariel Salleh and Terisa Turner; the *Journal Canadian Dimension*, edited by eco-socialists Ian Angus and Cy Gornik; the writings of the Belgian Marxist Daniel Tanuro on climate change and the dead-end of “green capitalism”; the research of French authors linked to the *Global Justice* movement, such as Jean-



Marie Harribey; the philosophical writings of Arno Münster, an eco-socialist follower of Ernst Bloch and André Gorz; the recent *Manifeste Ecosocialiste* (2014) edited by a committee of activists belonging to the radical wing of the French Front de Gauche (Left Front), and the European Eco-socialist Conference which took place in Geneva (2014).

It would be a mistake to conclude that eco-socialism is limited to Europe and North-America: there is a lively eco-socialist activity and discussion in Latin America. In Brazil a local Eco-socialist Network has been established, with scholars and activists from various parties, unions and peasant movements; in Mexico, there have been several publications discussing eco-socialism. The well-known Peruvian revolutionary leader Hugo Blanco has been active in the International Eco-socialist Network, emphasizing the common agenda of the indigenous movements and eco-socialism. And recently (2014) there have been eco-socialist Conferences in Quito and Caracas. Last but not least: there is a growing interest for eco-socialism in China, where the books of Bellamy Foster and Joel Kovel have been translated, and several conferences on eco-socialism took place in the last few years, organized by Chinese universities.

It is important to emphasize that eco-socialism is a project for the future, a horizon of the possible, a radical anti-capitalist alternative, but also, and inseparably, an agenda of *political action hic et hunc*, here and now. The eco-socialist strategy aims at the convergence of social and ecological struggles around concrete and immediate proposals. Any victories, however partial and limited, that slow down climate change and ecological degradation, are stepping stones for more victories: they develop our confidence and organization to push for more. There is no guarantee for the triumph of the eco-socialist alternative; there is very little to be expected from the powers that be. The only hope are the mobilizations from below, like in Seattle in 1999, which saw the coming together of “turtles” (ecologists”) and “teamsters” (trade-unionists”), and the birth of the Global Justice movement; or like in Copenhagen 2009, when 100 thousand demonstrators gathered around the battle cry “Change the System, not the Climate”; or in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, when 30 thousand delegates from indigenous, peasant, unionist and ecologist movements from Latin America and the world participated at the People’s Conference on Climate Change in the Defense of Mother Earth.



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