

# Myths on the Ecological Crisis\*

**TAKIS FOTOPOULOS**

The recent publication of the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finally brought the ecological crisis to the status of universal front-page news. At the same time, it led to the development of an entire mythology in the international mass media on the causes of the deepening ecological crisis and the ways out of it. This mythology is being reproduced, not only by the political and economic elites, but also by reformists in the Left and the Green movement, who declare that "the crisis belongs to all" (governments and civil societies alike). It would, therefore, be well worth examining the main ecological myths, taking for granted the shocking conclusions of the report, which simply confirms – using indisputable evidence – the worst predictions of the anti-systemic Left and ecologists which, until now, have been dismissed by the elites and the reformists as "scaremongering"!

According to the main myth reproduced by the system, it is "human activity", or "man" in general, that are responsible for the greenhouse effect and the consequent catastrophic climatic change threatening us all which, even if we take the best-case scenario of a 2.2C rise in temperature this century (while a 4.4C rise is much more likely!), would mean – according to the European Commission – that an extra 11,000 people in Europe would die within a decade, and from 2071 onwards there would be 29,000 extra deaths a year in southern Europe alone, on top of 27,000 extra deaths in northern Europe.

It is of course a sign of progress to recognise that the ecological crisis in general and climate change in particular are not acts of God or "normal climate phenomena". However, blaming "human activity" for the greenhouse effect is still a daft tautology, given that humans are the only members of the animal kingdom who have the capability to create it anyway. Furthermore, human beings do not just live like Robinson Crusoes on their isolated islands, but within societies, which are organised in particular ways that may be environment-friendly or otherwise. The facts, therefore, that Homo sapiens first appeared on Earth some five hundred thousand years ago and, as the IPCC report points out, concentrations in the atmosphere of carbon dioxide (the principal greenhouse gas responsible for global warming) are at their highest levels for at least 650,000 years, having begun to rise with the birth of the Industrial Revolution 250 years ago, clearly indicate a close connection between the kind of socio-economic system that has been established since the Industrial Revolution and the present ecological crisis.

More specifically, carbon dioxide concentrations ranged between 180 and 300 ppm (parts per million) over the previous 650,000 years, reaching 278 ppm on the eve of the Industrial Revolution. From then on, they began to rise at accelerating rates, particularly since the universalisation of the growth economy after the Second World War. The outcome of this process was that carbon dioxide concentrations increased from 315 ppm 50

years ago to 382 ppm today. Furthermore, the growth rate of such concentrations has lately been rising rapidly, as the IPCC stressed, with hardly disguised disquiet. Thus, whereas the average annual growth rate of concentrations was 1.4 ppm in the period between 1960 and 2005, it reached 1.9 ppm in the last decade (1995-2005) — a 36 per cent rise! At the same time, the planet's temperature kept on rising, accompanied not only by catastrophic heat waves, but also by devastating droughts and consequent water shortages, storms, etc.

Another myth, which is adopted mainly by various irrational (religious and spiritualist) currents, deep ecologists, primitivists, et. al. is that it is the Industrial Revolution, as well as industrial civilisation and its values, that are to be blamed for the current crisis. Similarly, others, influenced by Castoriadis's thought, blame the imaginary of development, which emerged at the same time as part of the ideology of Progress that dominated modernism in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

However, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>[1]</sup> the Industrial Revolution assumed the particular form that we are familiar with simply because it took place in a society in which control of the means of production belonged to minorities (merchants, landowners, etc). Thus, it became an integral part of the system of the capitalist market economy that emerged at the same time, the dynamics of which inevitably led to a continuous economic growth and development, consumerism and a growing concentration of income and wealth. This was inevitable because of the paramount need of those controlling the means of production to maximise profits — through improvements in economic efficiency (narrowly defined<sup>[2]</sup>) and competitiveness— which was ensured, also, by the minimisation of social controls over the market protecting labour and/or the environment. It is, therefore, obvious that the rise of the growth economy was not simply the result of changes in values, the imaginary, or ideology, but that it constituted, instead, the result of the dynamics of a concrete economic system in interaction with the outcome of social struggle. This is why the growth economy that developed in the countries formerly of “actually existing socialism”, although sharing several characteristics with the capitalist growth economy (and leading to a similar environmental disaster), was very different from it, as it was not the result of the dynamics of the market economy.<sup>[3]</sup>

According to yet another myth, which arises from the ignorance (deliberate or not) of the "systemic" character of the ecological crisis and its origins in the rise of the capitalist growth economy, the greenhouse effect does not make class and race distinctions, equally affecting rich and poor, white or black. This myth clearly ignores the fact that the basic aim of the capitalist growth economy is not to cover human needs, but to reproduce the present concentration of economic, political and social power in general at the hands of the privileged social strata.

The ecological crisis is neither caused by global "civil society", nor does it affect everybody equally. On the contrary, according to recent World Bank data, the poorest 37% of the world's population is accountable for only 7% of carbon dioxide emissions, whilst the 15% of the world's population that lives in rich countries is responsible for half these emissions<sup>[4]</sup> — something hardly surprising, of course, if one takes into account that the energy use per capita of high income countries is, today, more than 10 times higher than that of low income countries!<sup>[5]</sup> In terms of the consequences of the greenhouse effect, it is precisely the victims of the system who pay the heaviest price, whether they live in New Orleans or in the favelas of Rio, and not those living in luxurious villas in the affluent suburbs of America,

Western Europe or other continents.

From all these myths, which share the characteristic that they all take for granted the present socio-economic system of the capitalist market economy and its offspring, the growth economy, there arises a series of proposals which supposedly will help us to transcend the deteriorating ecological crisis. The common element of such proposals is that the crisis can be overcome as long as, on the one hand, governments take various measures to restrict the greenhouse emissions, encourage renewable sources of energy and adopt various technological fixes and, on the other hand, global civil society changes its values and way of life.

However, if we accept the premise of this article that both our values and our way of life are crucially determined by the prevailing socio-economic system, which is defined by the market economy and the growth economy, then it is clear that neither a radical change in our values nor in our way of life are feasible, unless both are accompanied by a parallel change in the socio-economic institutions defining the present system. This implies, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>[6]</sup> that truly radical proposals like the degrowth project<sup>[7]</sup> or the Simpler Way<sup>[8]</sup> are not feasible within the confines of the present system. Yet this, by no means, implies that the supposedly "realistic" half-measures suggested by the elites or the reformists in the Left and the Greens, which take for granted the growth economy and consumerism, have a better chance of succeeding in averting a possibly dramatic deterioration in the ecological situation within the next century or so. Not only can some of the panaceas they suggest be shown to be utterly incompatible with the growth economy and consumerism (like the vast expansion of renewable sources of energy<sup>[9]</sup>), but also many of them would hit the lower social strata particularly hard, turning things that have become necessities within the present pattern of life (private cars, flying, etc.) into luxuries.

All this confirms, once again, the conclusions that we drew in the very first issue of *Society and Nature*,<sup>[10]</sup> the precursor of this journal:

“Karl Marx, more than a century ago, could reasonably assume that the alternative to socialism would be barbarism. However, at that time, society could at least hope that the crisis was reversible. Today, the situation is more serious. The ecological crisis means that in the new millennium we will either create an ecotopia, based on ecological principles--reviving the tradition of the Greek polis and adjusting it to today's conditions-- or we will almost certainly face barbarism. At best, barbarism could take the form of a society even more technocratic and centralised than the present one and, in the last instance, a totalitarian one, even though, at a formal level, the institutions of representative democracy may continue to function. At worst, the disappearance of our species cannot be excluded altogether. Assuming that, even at the very last moment, an attempt will be made to solve the ecological problem, humanity is faced with a crucial choice between two, radically different, proposed solutions. The technocratic solution, pushed energetically by the capitalist system and supported by various environmentalists, seeks technological ways out of the crisis, which, to be compatible with the existing social system, usually presuppose a high degree of concentration...Alternatively, the ecodemocratic solution, seeking the causes of the ecological crisis in a social system that is based on institutionalised domination (not only exploitation) of human by

human and the implied attempt to dominate Nature, requires forms of social organisation that are based on direct democracy (political and economic) and compatible technical and economic structures. Quite apart, therefore, from the question of feasibility of the former solution, the latter definitely poses the demand for a new liberatory project.”

Today, after more than 15 years of theoretical and practical work, such a liberatory project has already been developed in the form of the Inclusive Democracy project. The next step is the more difficult one: to create the mass political will required for the implementation of such a project.

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[1] T. Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy*, [ch. 1](#).

[2] Efficiency is defined in a market economy on the basis of narrow techno-economic criteria of input minimisation/output maximisation and not on the basis of the degree of satisfaction of human needs, which is supposed to be the aim of an economic system. The usual definition of *economic efficiency* in terms of *technical efficiency*, *production efficiency* and *exchange efficiency*, although supposedly ‘neutral’, in fact assumes away distributional aspects, so that it is perfectly possible for a particular allocation of resources to be ‘efficient’ and at the same time incapable of meeting adequately (or at all) even the basic needs of many citizens.

[3] *ibid.* [ch. 5](#).

[4] see World Bank, *World Development Indicators* 2005, Tables 2.1 & 3.8

[5] *ibid.* Table 3.7

[6] T. Fotopoulos, “[Is degrowth compatible with a market economy?](#)”, *The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2007).

[7] see the degrowth debate in *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, vol. 3 no 1 (January 2007), and particularly, the article by Serge Latouche, “[De-growth: an electoral stake?](#)”.

[8] *ibid.* Ted Trainer, “[Renewable Energy: No Solution for Consumer Society](#)”.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] see “[Our Aims](#)”, *Society and Nature*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Issue 1), 1992.