

The price of “development” and the limitations of direct action*

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The ‘growth economy’ is the culprit for the ecological crisis

This year’s summer was very much following the pattern of climate change established by the greenhouse effect in the last decade or so, giving at the same time a strong forewarning of things to come. The European case is particularly striking.^[1] In Southern Europe, extreme and repeated heat waves spread havoc causing many deaths and leading to massive forest fires in the Mediterranean region destroying the little green still surviving the ‘development’ process there. At the same time, in Northern Europe, particularly Britain, massive flooding caused a similar havoc, at the very moment when climate scientists were blaming global warming for a dramatic rise in the number of storms in the Atlantic over the past century, with the average number of storms which develop every year having doubled since 1905.^[2] There is no doubt that behind these phenomena, directly or indirectly, is what we call the ‘growth economy’. Today, no serious analyst (apart from the system’s commissars) doubts that the constant expansion in the form of growth and development during the last two centuries has been at the expense of the quality of life, as far the atmosphere, clean water, the environment in general, and, directly or indirectly, life itself on the planet.

The realisation of this fact since the 1960s has led to a series of reports by world experts on the threatening ecological catastrophe and, consequently, to the creation of Green or ecological parties all over the world, but also to concerted attempts to reverse the crisis through various technological fixes and the use of renewable sources of energy. The outcome was some improvement in ecological efficiency –if we forget the criminal Green support given to almost all the wars of the transnational elite, from the bombing of Yugoslavia^[3] up to the present war on ‘terrorism’!– and the parallel development of an entire new profitable industry of renewable energy sources. At the same time, there is no self-respecting trans-national corporation (TNC) today –the oil industry included!– which has not already adopted in its rhetoric the need to protect the environment, whilst millionaire pop stars, with the explicit or implicit agreement of the elites, call the peoples all over the world, through mass rock concerts, to economise on energy and take various measures at the individual level to “save the planet”!

Needless to say, the planet cannot be saved with such aspirins proposed by the elites and Green parties like long-lasting bulbs, unsightly windmills, or the switch to biofuels which could lead millions of poor people in the South to massive deprivation, if not starvation.^[4]

This is clearly shown by the fact of the continuous – and lately accelerating— worsening of the main aspect of the ecological crisis: the greenhouse effect and the consequent climate change. But, contrary to what the Greens suggest, the cause of this ecological deterioration is not the fact that renewable sources of energy have not been used more extensively, not even the non-signing of the Kyoto treaty by the ‘bad’ neo-conservatives in the USA. As it has been shown,^[5] even if we had maximised the use of renewable energy sources and everybody had filled their homes with long-lasting bulbs, and even if the US had signed the Kyoto treaty, at the current growth rates, the reversal of whatever positive impact such measures could have had would have been just a matter of time.

Why the system cannot live without economic growth

In other words, the reversal of the threatening ecological catastrophe demands not less than a process of fundamental reversal of the growth economy (some call it a de-growth process^[6]) i.e., of the economy which, according to the Inclusive Democracy project, was the inevitable outcome of the dynamics of the market economy system, which was established after the Industrial Revolution, some two hundred years ago.^[7] It is only through such a process that the present pattern of life could really change—a necessary condition for the reversal of the catastrophic climate change going on. However, this is impossible in the present market economy system, given that the very reproduction of this system, on both the production and consumption sides of the economy, presupposes the maximisation of economic growth.

On the production side, an international market economy system functioning at a zero growth rate—which is perfectly feasible if zero growth was to be accompanied by a radical redistribution of income and wealth between and within the North and the South— is a pure fantasy. This is not only because even if some countries were successful in imposing drastic restrictions on the production activities of TNCs, the latter would simply move to other paradises which are thirsty for ‘development’, but also because a successful world policy of de-growth in the present market economy system, whose expansion crucially depends on TNCs, would soon precipitate a much more serious economic recession than the Great Recession of 1929—a development which would inevitably lead to new kinds of world totalitarianism (this time of the “ecological” variety)!

On the consumption side, it is well known that most people tolerate the present system, despite the huge inequalities and the dramatic deterioration of quality of life that it implies, mainly on account of consumerism, the basic by-product of the growth economy. It is for the “benefits” of the consumer society that millions of people all over the world waste their entire lives on boring, meaningless and stressful jobs –assuming that they find jobs securing their survival in the first place. It is therefore clear that a de-growth market economy is a contradiction in terms, as the lack of growth would not only deprive the market economy from its basic dynamics, but it would also deprive the present economy and society of any meaning.

The long-term way out of the crisis: an Ecological Democracy

The conclusion is that the long-term way out of the ecological cul-de-sac is an ecological

democracy, as part of an Inclusive Democracy.^[8] It is also clear that an ecological democracy is inconceivable within the framework of a market economy –the dynamics of which has initiated the monstrous developmental process, which has led us to the present critical point. Similarly, an ecological democracy is hardly compatible with a representative ‘democracy’ in which some elites take decisions on our behalf. In other words, an ecological democracy is inconceivable within the present system of the concentration of economic and political power, given that the renewable sources of energy would be completely inadequate to sort out the huge energy problems created by the present atrocious urban concentration, following the concentration of political and economic power. Not accidentally, the various ecological utopias proposed by some Greens, which attempt to rely exclusively on renewable sources of energy, concern decentralised and self-reliant communities (usually small islands) and not the modern centres of concentration of world population.

What is to be done in the short-term?

However, the crucial question that arises at the moment refers to what we can do in the short term, so that, on the one hand, we could delay as far as possible the outburst of the ecological crisis and, on the other, develop a mass consciousness to the effect that the present measures suggested by the elites and mainstream ecologists are completely inadequate to have any noteworthy effect in averting or even significantly delaying the effects of the crisis. The heat waves, the drought and the desertification of large parts of the Earth and the consequent flooding of even some major cities is a matter of time which gets shorter and shorter as the Arctic meltdown is speeding up, with top climate scientists now warning that we only have a decade to save the planet.^[9] Furthermore, contrary to the myths reproduced by mainstream ecologists and the mass media, the ecological crisis (as well as the other parts of the present multidimensional crisis) has a clear class nature, as it is mainly due to the activities of the richer social strata of the planet, whereas it is the poorer strata which mainly suffer the consequences of it.^[10]

Clearly, the measures taken to date to deal with the ecological crisis by government parties, frequently jointly with Green parties or at least with the support of various Non Government Organisations of the civil society, have failed, as the improvements achieved were either marginal compared to the sheer size of the ecological crisis we face, or simply have been used as a basis to develop new profitable businesses which exploit the public’s (particularly the middle classes’) sensitivity on the matter. It is therefore obvious that only our self-organisation could offer an effective self-protection to the developing catastrophe rather than leaving the matter to the political and economic elites and the vote-seeking Green parties. And, of course, we talk only of defence, given that in the short term we have to take for granted the present system of the market economy and its political complement, representative ‘democracy’, which rules out the required radical changes that necessarily pass through a dramatic change of the pattern of life and a real decentralisation and self-reliance.

The limitations of direct action

But, what sort of self-organisation is possible today, so that the effects of our action could somehow match the size of the problem we face? In Western Europe and elsewhere, for some years now, a movement has flourished to reclaim the commons -- instances of which we saw some years ago in the British “Reclaiming the Streets Movement”, or at present in

Italy and Bolivia, where movements reclaiming the control on water, land, energy, knowledge, institutions, etc. are being reclaimed from the area of marketisation and commercialization. In fact, this movement, at present, aims to protest against the disappearance of public space and the privatization of resources such as water, but also energy, knowledge, etc. that were once considered a human right. In this form, therefore, the “commons” movement has usefully expanded the concept of “commons” from its traditional meaning of common land or water to include ‘public goods’ such as public space, public education, health and the infrastructure that allows our society to function (such as electricity or water delivery systems). In this broad sense, the commons movement aims directly at neoliberal globalisation itself.

Similarly, in the last few days, direct action against the planned construction of one more terminal and runway in London Heathrow airport was relatively significant in raising consciousness about the effects on climate change as a result of the mass expansion of air traffic. This is an important factor of greenhouse emissions given that, as a reformist Green analyst put it, “depending on whether you believe the government's figures or those produced by academic researchers, by 2050 the greenhouse gases produced by the UK's air passengers will equate to between 91% and 258% of the carbon dioxide the government says the whole economy should be producing”.^[11] Thus, despite the elites’ attempt to terrorise citizens, with the “progressive” new Labour government under Gordon Brown not hesitating to use the anti-terror legislation for this purpose, hundreds of people camped in the airport perimeter for several days, ignoring massive police presence and intimidation.

However, the obvious question asked is: what could we expect from direct action? Even if it is true that this latest activity may herald the creation of a new political movement, what chances such a movement has in persuading the elites in radically changing course with respect to their policies? Clearly, it is perfectly possible that these elites, under sufficient pressure, may cancel a number of big projects here and there. But, even if such adequate action is taken, it will hardly be anyway near the required action for the reversal of the ecological crisis. If millions on the streets could not move an inch the UK and US elites from their decision to invade and destroy Iraq, one could easily imagine how ineffective direct action taken by a few thousand activists would be – even if they enjoy the support of the middle classes– in persuading the elites to dig their own graves. And yet, this is what radical decentralisation of power and de-growth amounts to!

It is therefore more than clear that although direct action, or resistance of the reclaiming the commons variety, may be useful in educating people, such actions, by themselves, are utterly ineffective in changing the present course leading to ecological catastrophe. Far from it, similar movements are bound, at best, to be marginalised or, at worst, to be integrated within the system –as it happened so often in the past. For this outcome to be avoided, such movements should become integral parts of a broader anti-systemic political movement, with its own analysis of the present multidimensional crisis, its own vision of a future society which would rule out any form of concentration of power –the root cause of the present crisis– and its own short and long-term transitional strategy. Such a movement could have as an intermediate aim the collective self-organisation of people at the local level, an aim that could be achieved through calling citizens’ assemblies in neighbourhoods and local communities. But, the final aim should be to reclaim the commons in the broad sense defined above, through the creation ‘from below’ of alternative institutions for a political, economic, social and ecological democracy, what we call an Inclusive Democracy!

* The above text is based on two articles, which were first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily, Eleftherotypia, on 21/7/2007 & 4/8/2007.

- [1] John Vidal and Kate Connolly, "Southern Europe scorched as rain batters north", *The Guardian* (28/7/2007).
- [2] Alok Jha and Tania Branigan, "Big rise in number of Atlantic storms blamed on global warming", *The Guardian* (30/7/2007).
- [3] See T. Fotopoulos, "[The First War of the Internationalised Market Economy](#)", *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (July 1999).
- [4] John Vidal, "Biofuel demand to push up food prices", *The Guardian* (5/7/2007).
- [5] See e.g. Ted Trainer, "[Renewable Energy: No Solution for Consumer Society](#)", *The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2007).
- [6] Serge Latouche, "[The globe downshifted](#)", *Le Monde Diplomatique* (January 2006).
- [7] see T. Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional crisis and Inclusive Democracy* (2005) [ch. 5](#)
- [8] *Ibid.*, [ch. 15](#)
- [9] Michael McCarthy and David Osborne, "Massive surge in disappearance of Arctic sea ice sparks global warning", *The Independent* (15/9/2006).
- [10] See T. Fotopoulos, "[The Myths on the Ecological Crisis](#)", *The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 2007)
- [11] George Monbiot, "Beneath Heathrow's pall of misery, a new political movement is born", *The Guardian* (21/8/2007).