

# Kyoto and other tales\*

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The worsening ecological crisis, as part of the multidimensional crisis, was in the limelight again this week when the Kyoto protocol came into force among futile, if not disorientating, celebrations by the 'progressive' part of the transnational elite. Some 141 countries - which account for about 55% of greenhouse gas emissions thought by most experts to be the cause of drastic climatic change - have ratified the treaty, which pledges to cut these emissions by 5.2% by 2012. Still, the USA and Australia, which, together with China and India in the periphery, are mainly responsible for the remaining 45% of the greenhouse gas emissions, have put themselves outside the treaty's framework, assigning greater priority to the market economy's dynamic and its complement, the growth economy<sup>[1]</sup>, rather than to the threatening climatic disaster.

Thus, the US political elite (Congress and Administration), which is completely controlled by the economic elite - given that it does not face any significant pressure 'from below' - attempts to question the very existence and significance of the greenhouse effect. On this, it has the enthusiastic support of a scientific lobby which—financed by a consortium representing almost all the significant US and EU corporations in oil, car, steel, coal, electricity, gas, chemicals/plastics and air transport—does everything it can 'scientifically' to justify this stand. At the same time, China and India, the new economic 'miracles' according to some ex-Marxists(!)<sup>[2]</sup>, react against any kind of effective environmental controls which would adversely affect their "development" —something not at all peculiar, after all, if one takes into account that the motor of this 'development' is the very low production cost, as a consequence of the survival wages and the existence of only rudimentary controls for the protection of labour and the environment in these countries. The very low production cost is, anyway, the 'comparative advantage' used by China and India in order to persuade the multinational corporations to transfer to them certain parts (usually) of their production process, within the framework of capitalist neoliberal globalisation.

It is, therefore, obvious that the transnational elite is divided on this issue, since the EU and Japan have always supported taking measures of some sort to avert an ecological catastrophe, whereas the US (which alone accounts for over one third of the greenhouse gas emissions) followed by Australia have never subscribed to such a policy. However, given that the economic elites belonging to the 'progressive' part of the transnational elite are as keen as its 'conservative' part in expanding their markets and profits, it was inevitable that the measures they adopted in Kyoto would bear no relation at all in size to what is the biggest problem faced by humanity today. This becomes obvious from the fact that, even if the countries which ratified the treaty were to fulfil their obligations entirely —something bordering on science fiction given their past performance<sup>[3]</sup>— the effect in averting the threatening ecological disaster would be negligible, if indeed noticeable at all.

Thus, according to the UN's intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC), the greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced by 60-80% by 2020, or 2050 at the latest, in comparison with their 1990 levels, so that dangerous climatic change can be averted, and even if this were to be achieved now, the world would still warm up by at least 1C, and sea levels would go on rising for a century! This is because, as the chairman of this panel has stated, 'we have already reached dangerous levels of carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere'. Even so, at the Earth summit of Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the 'progressive' elites, having buried the proposed UN code of conduct on multinational corporations — aiming to impose some mild restrictions on them<sup>[4]</sup>— before the Summit even began, were content with a political (not legal) commitment simply to stabilise the gas emissions.

In 1995, the intergovernmental panel published its research findings representing the consensus of the world's leading 2,000 climatologists. According to this report, climatic change is a problem directly related to human activity —something which has just been confirmed by the first evidence of human-produced global warming in the oceans<sup>[5]</sup>. The panel estimated that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which has remained stable for over a thousand years, has increased by one-third since 1750, i.e. the period of the flourishing of the market economy and the capitalist industrial revolution. A later report by the same panel confirmed that present carbon dioxide concentration has not been exceeded in the last 420,000, or probably even 20m, years!<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1997, another Earth Summit in Kyoto adopted a new treaty which, once again, was welcomed by social democrats and reformists in the Left and the Green movement as a 'historic step'. In fact, not only was this summit another fiasco but it also institutionalised a complete commercialisation of the process of controlling greenhouse gas emissions, through the creation of an 'emissions market' in which the greatest polluters would be able to buy their 'right to pollute' from those polluters who have not exhausted their 'carbon credits' —a forward market has already been set in motion!<sup>[7]</sup> This would be done through a mechanism whereby polluters, instead of cutting carbon dioxide at home, could either buy "carbon credits" from countries which have exceeded their own targets for cuts, or invest in carbon-reducing technologies elsewhere in the world. Therefore, as long as the overall target of curbing greenhouse gas emissions to 5.2% of the 1990 levels is achieved by 2012, everything is fine in the Kyoto fool's paradise, despite the fact that this target has very little to do with the required reduction by 60-80% within the next 15 years (or 45 years at the latest).

It was not, therefore, surprising that, instead of a curbing of greenhouse gas emissions, there was a 16.4% increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere between 1990 and 2002, and that in the last two years there has been a further unexplained and unprecedented rise of carbon dioxide.<sup>[8]</sup> At the same time, the planet's temperature has been increasing faster than expected and the Hadley Centre for Climate Change presently estimates that average temperatures by 2050 will rise by 3.5C, well above the 2C which the EU says is the limit to avoid catastrophic global warming<sup>[9]</sup>. The 1990s was the warmest decade for 1,000 years,<sup>[10]</sup> and three major UN organizations recently warned that at least 150,000 people die needlessly each year as a direct result of global warming and related droughts, storms etc.<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, according to the first comprehensive study into the effect of higher temperatures on the natural world, climate change over the next 50 years is expected to drive a quarter of land animals and plants into extinction (more than 1m species).<sup>[12]</sup>

At the same time, the poorer social strata, who mainly pay the heavy price of the ecological crisis, are neutralised by the dilemma of ‘work or a better environment’ which they face within a market economy system –something which makes the need for a massive antisystemic movement as a way out of the multidimensional crisis even more imperative.

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\* This is based on an article that was first published in the fortnight column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia*

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- [1] See T. Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy*, (Cassell/Continuum, London, N.Y. 1997), chs 1-2
- [2] Martin Jacques, “No monopoly on modernity,” *The Guardian* (5/2/2005).
- [3] Andrew Osborn, “EU nowhere near meeting Kyoto targets,” *The Guardian* (3/12/2003).
- [4] George Monbiot, “For worse: world is suffering from broken promises,” *The Guardian* (22/8/2002).
- [5] See Tim Barnett’s announcement to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Tim Radford, “Oceans of evidence for global warming,” *The Guardian* (19/2/2005).
- [6] See Paul Brown, “A world of extremes as the planet heats up,” *The Guardian* (23/1/2001).
- [7] See e.g. Philippe Bove and Francois Ploye, “The polluter pays but who profits?,” *Le Monde diplomatique* (July 2002) and G. Monbiot, “The great climate sell-off,” *The Guardian* (16/11/2000).
- [8] Paul Brown, “Climate fear as carbon levels soar,” *The Guardian* (11/10/2004).
- [9] See the December 2004 report of the Centre entitled “Uncertainty, Risk and Dangerous Climate Change,” (quoted in P. Brown’s, “Climate forecast soars into the red,” *The Guardian* (14/12/2004).
- [10] Tim Radford and Paul Brown, “Warming could be worst in 10,000 years,” *The Guardian* (23/1/2001).
- [11] Paul Brown, “Global warming kills 150,000 a year,” *The Guardian* (12/12/2003).
- [12] Paul Brown, “An unnatural disaster,” *The Guardian* (8/1/2004).