

The ecological crisis on the verge of a catastrophe*

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Few people today have any doubt that the ecological crisis and particularly the greenhouse effect —as well as the consequent climate change— which is the most important manifestation of this crisis, worsens daily. A prolonged drought was a problem last year in Spain and Portugal; this year, the drought has spread to Central and North Europe. Even rainy old Britain has ended up imposing more and more restrictions on the use of water— although a significant part of the problem is due to the practices of the privatised water companies, which prefer to expand their profits rather than do the necessary investments (the main reason for the privatisation of the water industry!) for the improvement of the centuries-old piping system. According to a recent Spanish study, global warming is melting the icecaps and raising sea levels around Spain by 2.5mm a year, which implies a 12cm-15cm rise by 2050. This means that Spain's beaches are expected to shrink by an average of 15 metres (50ft) by 2050, as global warming causes sea levels to creep up while stronger waves and currents eat away at the coastline^[1]. One can imagine what this means for a country like Spain, whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism!

Furthermore, few doubt the direct link between the ecological crisis and the growth economy, i.e. the system of economic organisation whose basic aim is the maximisation of economic growth, whether this aim is 'objectively' determined (as in the case of the capitalist market economy, whose dynamic inevitably leads to it) or not (as in the case of the ex 'actually existing socialism', where the development of productive forces was an ideological aim). Of course, it is not accidental that during the lifetime of the growth economy (in both its capitalist and 'socialist' versions), the cumulative damage to the environment is much bigger than in all of History. According, for instance, to a recent study of the oldest Antarctic ice core, the rapid rise in greenhouse gases over the past century is unprecedented than in the past 800,000 years! Carbon dioxide that was always between 180 parts per million (ppm) and 300 ppm during the 800,000 years is now 380 ppm. Even more worrying are the dynamics of the phenomenon, with increases in carbon dioxide never exceeding 30 ppm in 1,000 years and yet now carbon dioxide has risen by 30 ppm in the last 17 years.^[2]

The outcome of all this is that the planet's temperature has been rising lately much faster than predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its 2001 Report. A draft of the next report of the Panel —which brings together hundreds of experts— that was presented to governments in April and will be made public next year, drawing on research over the past five years, stresses the possibility of the Earth's temperature rising well above the ceiling quoted earlier.^[3] Very recently, also, professor David King, the UK's government chief scientific adviser, calculated that the world is likely

to suffer a temperature rise of more than 3°C during the present century ***even if international agreement could be reached on limiting emissions*** (which was supposed to stabilise the climate at an increase of no more than 2°C)^[4]. According to his report's estimates, this would put up to 400 million people worldwide at risk of hunger, because of the expected drastic reduction in cereal crops. The dire predictions about the impending radical climate change have now become an almost daily event. Just a few days ago, a study from the British Met Office's Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research^[5] predicted that one third of the planet will be desert by the year 2100, as a result of extreme drought, which will render agriculture practically impossible in the worst affected areas. It should be noted that the findings represent the first time that the threat of increased drought from climate change has been quantified with a supercomputer climate model such as the one operated by the Hadley Centre.

However, although almost all experts (apart from, those in the service of the system) agree that we are at the edge of an ecological catastrophe, there is no corresponding consensus on the causes of the crisis. The reformist Left and the 'orthodox' Greens blame the crisis on the prevailing value system and technology. On the other hand, according to the antisystemic ecology, the ecological crisis is mainly due to the dynamics of the market economy and the values established by this system —predominantly the instrumental conception of Nature (i.e. the view of Nature as an instrument for growth and development)— as well as the technologies chosen within the same system to meet its basic aim of growth maximisation.

It is not difficult to show that the concentration of power—an inevitable outcome of the dynamics of the market economy—is the ultimate cause of the ecological crisis, as well as of any other dimension of the present multidimensional crisis. To take the example of the greenhouse effect again, according to the most recent World Bank data, the poorest 37% of the world population is responsible for only 7% of the greenhouse emissions, whilst more than half of the total emissions would be blamed on to the richest 15% of the world population. Furthermore, per head use of energy in rich countries is today ten times higher than that in poor countries!^[6] It is therefore clear that the cause of the greenhouse effect is the pattern of living itself implied by the growth economy. The living pattern, in turn, would be determined by the dynamics of the market economy and mainly by the concentration of income and wealth among countries as well as within them, the consequent urban concentration, the car culture, and so on.

Clearly, therefore, transcending the present multidimensional crisis —an essential part of which is the ecological crisis— is not simply a matter of changing policies or values, as the reformist Left and Greens assert, but a matter of changing the very system of the capitalist market economy, which leads to unlimited growth and further concentration of economic power. The ecological crisis could not be overcome without changing the very pattern of life characteristic of present society. But, a precondition for this is a radical decentralisation of production, consumption and distribution, which would be impossible within the market economy. Particularly so when the required radical changes in values and technology are not possible without a change in the system itself.

The crucial dilemma we face today is therefore the following:

- either we follow the choices of reformist Greens and the reformist Left for sustainable

development, namely, for a process of «greening capitalism» under the pressure of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Green organisations etc—despite the fact that this option has already proved bankrupt by the worsening ecological crisis,

- or, we struggle instead for an ecological democracy, as an integral part of an Inclusive Democracy. This stand, clearly blaming the concentration of power and the instrumental view of Nature, which are implied by the market economy, sees the way out of the crisis only in terms of a society which would institutionalise the equal distribution of economic and political power and aims at a radical decentralisation.^[7]

* The above text is an extended version of an article which was first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 30/9/2006

[1] Giles, Tremlett, “Global warming to wash away beaches, warns Spanish study”, *The Guardian* (11/9/2006).

[2] Steve Connor, “Ice bubbles reveal biggest rise in CO₂ for 800,000 years”, *The Independent* (5/9/2006).

[3] David Adam, “UN scientists issue dire warning on global warming”, *The Guardian* (28/2/2006).

[4] Andrew Grice, “‘Millions at risk’ from escalation in global warming”, *The Independent* (15/4/2006).

[5] Michael McCarthy, “The century of drought”, *The Independent* (4/10/2006).

[6] World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2005*, Table 3.7

[7] See T. Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy*, [ch. 7](#).