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War and ecology

Agent Orange, a slow violence that still kills

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The Vietnam-Dioxin Collective is part of a decolonial ecology since the cause is not only ecological but is also the result of colonial and imperialist logics and of a capitalist system that produces environmental crises (which are in fact continuous) and wars in times of crisis. We demand justice for the victims of Agent Orange, a chemical and defoliant weapon used during the US-led Imperial War in Vietnam.

Agent Orange was produced in this way by American multinationals such as Monsanto, Dow Chemical or Hercules, to maximize profits and to raze the largest possible area of forest. It was spread from 10 August 1961, then massively during Operation Ranch Hand in 1962 and until 1971. Defoliants were dumped over 10% of the surface of South Vietnam.

The term “ecocide” was used for the first time, in 1970, by the biologist Arthur Galston to describe this operation by American troops, which was toxic on two levels. On the one hand, in terms of health. The dioxin of Agent Orange causes many pathologies for the two to four million victims directly exposed to spraying. In addition to these, there is an undetermined number of victims over the long term, due to the hereditary transmission of these pathologies,

On the other hand, from an ecological point of view, because by the end of the war, 20% of South Vietnam's forests had been destroyed by chemical means, and more than a third of the mangroves had disappeared. Currently, the presence of dioxin is still massive in the affected areas. The molecule persists in the land and water and has been contaminating spaces and living things for several decades.

It is therefore the context of the war that has allowed this humanitarian and ecological disaster. In a capitalist context, everything is done to maximize profits, even if companies were aware of the toxicity of the products.

The legal proceedings underway in France

Tran To Nga, a Franco-Vietnamese former journalist and liaison officer for the South Vietnamese Liberation Front, filed a lawsuit in 2014 against the companies that produced or marketed Agent Orange, in an effort to set a precedent for victims of Agent Orange. The trial in first instance took place in Évry in 2021 and ended with a decision of the court which declared itself incompetent to judge the case. Effectively, the defending party believes that it only obeyed the United States government despite the flexibility that the companies had. During this trial, the multinationals claimed that they “provided a public service as part of national defence.” They know that it is impossible to attack the United States internationally, as this crime was committed before the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the US does not recognize the International Court of Justice either. The Paris Court of Appeal confirmed this decision in 2024. Tran To Nga and his two lawyers, William Bourdon and Bertrand Repolt, have appealed to the Court of Cassation, whose hearing is expected to take place in 2026 at the earliest. Attacking multinationals is the only way to create a jurisprudence, even if politically, there are no illusions about this mode of action whose limits are those of bourgeois justice. However, this trial makes it possible to point out the contradictions of capitalism and a double imperialist-colonial-racial standard.

Chemical warfare in the service of imperialism and colonialism

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons defines a chemical weapon as a chemical that is used to cause death or other harm through its toxic action. Like nuclear weapons, they can be considered weapons of mass destruction. The 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) prohibits their production, use and stockpiling. 193 States are signatories to this convention. Despite this, persistent violations are noted, often to the detriment of civilians and to the benefit of multinational producers.

However, chemical weapons have recently been used in Ukraine by Russia (chloropicrin), in Kurdistan by Turkey (white phosphorus), in Syria by the regime of Bashar Al-Assad (sarin gas), in Gaza by the Israeli occupation army (white phosphorus) or historically in Algeria by France (CN2D gas or napalm).

Winston Churchill said that chemical weapons would be “the right medicine for the Bolshevik.” The colonized peoples under imperialist domination have also suffered the yoke of these chemical weapons, whether they were Communists or not. Also, there is a double colonial and racist standard in the way we view the victims of Agent Orange. In 1984, U.S. veterans who were victims of Agent Orange filed a class action against the multinational producers and obtained out-of-court compensation in exchange for their silence. In 2009, the Vietnamese victims who had also filed a complaint for crimes against humanity and war crimes were dismissed by the Supreme Court, considering that Agent Orange is not a poison under international law and that there is therefore no ban on the use of a herbicide. This denial of justice and reparations for Vietnamese victims is a symptom of racism, which could be described as environmental racism, of which colonized bodies are victims. This is proof that some lives are worth less than others.

A relationship with the Earth: for an "ecology of the mangrove"

The relationship to the Earth is too often appropriated by the far right, which thus sets two traps for non-white people who would like to reappropriate it, as Myriam Bahaffou says: “Our anti-racist spaces oscillate between these poles: the naïve celebration of our lives ‘in spite of everything’, or even our success under capitalism, or the obsession with being “real”, an authentic, pure and wild self, which necessarily entails a constant policing of the remains of the ‘settler; in oneself or in others.”

Thus, either we enter the racial system, the product of racial capitalism, by integrating ourselves completely into whiteness, even if it means claiming a link to the Western land and imposing a colonial vision of the Vietnamese land; or we affirm our Asian identities at the risk of fantasizing about what does not necessarily exist or differently in each other. From our perspective, we therefore claim another identity relationship, plural, which allows us to reject these two options.

The far-right identity relationship (being attached to a land because of one's origins, blood ties and so on) is a vertical root relationship that does not allow us to think about the complexity of our diasporas. It is possible to think of a plural and diverse, collective relationship. This is the principle of the rhizome. It is together, as a collective, that we can rediscover a relationship with Southeast Asia that is no longer predatory. Moreover, this is why we think that the collective can be an emancipatory space for many of us. The notion of “rhizome” comes to us from the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These two authors think of rhizomes — the horizontal, dynamic and multidirectional root network of the mangrove — as a counterpoint to a vertical, fixed rooting. Maryse Condé and Édouard Glissant spoke of the Caribbean environment, particularly the West Indies, violated by slavery and colonization, as the key to this new relationship to the land, to others, to the world. Initially devalued, colonized and violated lands such as mangroves and their underwater rhizomes become a fertile place from which to think about community complexity.

This anchoring is fundamental because it allows us to think about the struggle against a capitalist and colonial system, whose current contradictions feed the far right by going beyond its identity logics without neglecting our concrete situation and our aspiration to find our place. By perpetuating the legacy of our struggles while taking into account the complexity of our experiences and trajectories, we are building bridges with other struggles, such as the resistance of the Palestinian or Sahrawi people, or for example on the subject of chlordecone which was spread by France in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

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*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Revue l'Anticapitaliste](#).*

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