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Book Reviews:

Can capitalism prevent catastrophic climate change?

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Tuesday 20 May 2014

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It is now too late to stop global warming. Even if greenhouse gas production stopped today, two centuries of emissions will remain in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. The average temperature of Earth's atmosphere and oceans will rise, with increasingly severe effects on climate and weather, no matter what we do. [1]

If emissions continue at today's levels, catastrophic climate change is inevitable. At the very least, large parts of the world will be uninhabitable, and conditions in the rest will be harsher than humans have ever experienced. The survival of our species, and of the millions of animal and plant species we share this world with, is at stake.

So the critical issue today is whether emissions can be reduced deeply enough and quickly enough to limit the damage. Given the uncertainties of climate science, including the unpredictability of qualitative "tipping points" that may radically accelerate the rate of change, we can't know just how deep or how quick the reductions must be—but most scientists agree that cuts must start now, and emissions must be close to zero by midcentury.

Roughly speaking, there are four schools of thought about how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and avert climate catastrophe. The consumer behavior school wants us to travel less, recycle more, eat locally-grown food, and have fewer babies. The economic reform school proposes taxes, trading schemes, and sometimes regulations. The technology substitution school calls for new kinds of equipment. And the social change school advocates changes in the dominant system of producing and distributing material goods.

While an increasing number of environmentalists see a need for radical social change, most Greens continue to hope that quick solutions can be implemented without substantial social, economic, or institutional changes—which in practice means reforms that don't require challenging the capitalist system that got us into this mess in the first place. Carbon taxes, emission trading, renewable energy subsidies, CO2 capture and storage, energy efficiency, population control—these and many more proposals seek to reduce greenhouse gases while leaving capitalism essentially intact.

Two recent books challenge the claim that a capitalist economy can be a green economy, exposing the insuperable obstacles that stand in the way of market-based capitalist solutions to the climate crisis.

In *Capitalism and Climate Change*, Max Koch goes beyond the usual Marxist argument that "capitalism must grow or die," to examine how that general law has actually manifested in capitalism in the twentieth century. The majority of his book is an information-packed account of the oil-based energy regime that powered the immense expansion of industrial capitalism from World War I through the 1960s, and of the changes that resulted from the shift to finance-driven capitalism beginning in the early 1970s. Far from leading to the "dematerialized production" that some analysts predicted, the main environmental change in the new financial regime has been the export of the dirtiest industries to China and other third world countries.

Koch provides a detailed analysis of attempts to limit emissions through the European carbon-trading scheme, showing that its failures result not from poor design, but from the fundamental role that fossil fuels play in capitalism's global operations.

Within the framework of the current accumulation regime and its consumption norm, and on the basis of the current mode of regulation and energy regime, the type of changes in production and consumption processes that scientists

regard as necessary to mitigate climate change will be impossible to achieve.

Koch offers a brief summary of the governmental and regulatory changes he thinks are needed, but he is agnostic on whether they can actually be implemented. Indeed, his final comments are pessimistic, warning that the accelerating climate crisis could instead produce mass support for authoritarian solutionsâ€”in which the â€˜West’ defends its way of life and the corresponding international division of labour using its military power, while closing and monitoring its borders and abandoning the victims of economic crisis and climate change in the developing countries to their fate.”

That is certainly a real possibility, one that makes it all the more essential to build a powerful countermovement against the onset of a new barbarism.

Daniel Tanuro, a leading Belgian ecosocialist associated with the Fourth International, is committed to building such a movement. Despite its title, *Green Capitalism: Why it Can’t Work*, originally published in French as *L’impossible capitalisme vert* (La Découverte, 2009), is actually about climate change: other environmental issues are mentioned only briefly.

Where Koch focuses on the environmentally destructive history of global capitalism in the twentieth century, Tanuro challenges proposals to stop the climate crisis by carbon taxes, emissions trading, and green subsidies, showing that they can’t possibly produce the promised results.

A global energy revolution is required, replacing very profitable fossil-fuel systems with renewables that are not yet cost effective in capitalist terms. An economy in which investors demand short-term profits simply can’t carry through such a sweeping change: “In the short period of forty years which is left to us, one cannot envisage how the system could instigate a transition in energy use at the necessary or possible level with its mechanisms of price, competition and the market,” he writes.

In Tanuro’s view, the need for an energy revolution also challenges the view that socialism will initiate an era of unlimited material abundance, in which the means of production, freed from the fetters of profit, would expand to meet all human needs. Massive public investment in renewables can meet our energy needs, but at a cost:

The snag is that these investments call for material production, thus an energy source which, at least in the first phase of transition, must be mostly fossil fuelâ€”which is a source of increased greenhouse gas emissions. . . .

The conclusion is inescapable. The constraints [on greenhouse gas emissions] cannot be respected unless the investments necessary for a new energy system go hand in hand with a radical reduction of energy consumption in developed countries.

In other words, new technology alone won’t protect the climate, because the very process of manufacturing and installing it will increase emissions during the transition. That important insight is rarely mentioned by the “technology will solve all problems” crowd.

Tanuro estimates that a forty-year global conversion to renewables, combined with necessary emission reductions and phasing out nuclear energy production, will require a 50–75 percent reduction in energy consumption in Europe and North America. The cuts must be even greater if the transition also involvesâ€”as it surely mustâ€”substantial improvements in the living standards of the three billion people who now live in absolute poverty in the global South.

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At the same time, he argues, people in the North must accept significant lifestyle changes, including less travel, and diets that emphasize local vegetables rather than meat. This claim—“unlike Tanuro’s well-documented account of the social roots of the climate crisis”—is brief and impressionistic. He dismisses out of hand any idea that eliminating polluting industries and stopping hyper-consumption by the rich could by themselves achieve our goals. He simply asserts, without proof, that the transition requires working people to reduce their living standards. He may be right, but he doesn’t make his case.

Nor does he explain how a call for sacrifice could contribute to building effective mass movements to replace capitalism and implement massive global energy changes. He may not intend it, but he appears to be calling for an ecosocialist austerity movement, and that would seem to be a nonstarter.

Both of these books are important contributions to our understanding of capitalism and climate change.

Max Koch’s study contains a wealth of data and analysis, showing the intimate connections between capitalist economic growth and the destruction of nature. If the publishers choose to make it available in a less-expensive edition, it will be an invaluable resource for activists as well as academics.

Daniel Tanuro’s book is specifically written for activists. He challenges Greens to recognize that environmental destruction cannot be stopped so long as capitalism continues, and urges Marxists to take into account limits to growth. His arguments deserve careful consideration, and should stimulate debate and discussion among ecosocialists.

Unfortunately, both books are weak on solutions: they have little to say on that always-critical question, “What is to be done?” Having been convinced that green capitalism is a contradiction in terms, readers have a right to expect convincing insights into what alternatives are possible, and how they can be achieved. Koch leaves us with a pessimistic warning of a new era of authoritarian capitalism; Tanuro calls for building an ecosocialist movement, but offers little guidance on how that can be done, or what the movement should do.

Despite that limitation, Tanuro concludes on a high note, with a brief but inspiring statement of ecosocialist aspiration in the twenty-first century.

The only possible socialism is ecosocialism which is a focused expression of the fight against the exploitation of human labour and the destruction of natural resources by capitalism—“from now on these two strands are indivisible. Ecosocialism does not stem from a romantic vision of establishing “harmony” between humanity and nature, but from the conviction that true wealth resides in creative activity, in free time, in social relations, and in the contemplation of the world with wonder.

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[1] An earlier version of this review, dealing only with Daniel Tanuro’s book, was published in the online journal [Climate & Capitalism](#), which Ian Angus edits.