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Ecosocialism

Discussing the Climate Crisis: Dubious Notions & False Paths

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Some of these come from half- or quarter-truths while others are based on fake news, lies and mystifications. Many are full of good will and good intentions, but would take us in the wrong direction.

If we continue with these slogans — even if painted green — we will find ourselves in a blind alley. I offer the following 10 examples as ones to avoid.

1. We must “save the planet.”

We encounter this slogan everywhere: on billboards, in the press, in magazines, in the declarations of political leaders, etc. But this is nonsense.

Planet Earth is no way in danger! Whatever the climate, it will continue to revolve around the sun for the next few billion years. What is threatened by global warming are multiple forms of the existing web of life on this planet, including ours: the species *Homo sapiens*.

“Saving the planet” gives the false impression that the crisis is something external to us, somewhere else, that it does not implicate us directly. It suggests that we are not asking people to worry about their own or their children’s lives, but about a hazy abstraction, “the planet.”

No wonder that less political people respond: “I’m too busy with my problems to worry about ‘the planet.’”

2. “Take action” to save the planet.

This commonplace slogan, infinitely satiated, is a variation of the previous formula.

It contains a half-truth: everyone must personally contribute to avoiding the catastrophe. But it conveys the illusion that to make “small gestures” — turning off the lights, turning off the faucet, etc. — will avoid the worst.

We thus eliminate — consciously or not — the need for profound structural changes in the current mode of production and consumption. These structural changes challenge the very foundation of capitalist production and society based on profit maximization.

3. The polar bear is in danger.

A photo we find everywhere shows a poor polar bear trying to survive among melting blocks of ice. Certainly, the life of the polar bear — and many other species in the polar regions — is threatened. While this image may arouse the compassion of a few generous souls, it does not directly seem to concern most of the population.

But the melting of polar ice is a threat not only for the brave polar bear, but for half, if not more, of humanity who live in large cities by the sea. The immense glaciers of Greenland and Antarctica will raise sea levels by tens of meters — however, only a few meters will submerge cities like Venice, Amsterdam, London, New York, Rio de Janeiro,

Shanghai and Hong Kong.

This is not going to happen next year of course, but scientists note that the melting of these glaciers is accelerating. It is impossible to predict how quickly it will take place. In fact, many factors are currently difficult to calculate.

By highlighting only the poor polar bear, we hide the fact that this is a terrifying affair that concerns us all.

3. Vulnerable nations (Bangladesh, for example) suffer greatly from climate change.

This is a half-truth. Yes, warming will (and already does) acutely affect poor countries in the Global South, which are least responsible for CO2 emissions. And it is true that these countries will be the most impacted by climatic disasters, hurricanes, drought, and a reduction of water sources.

But it is a mistake to imagine that the countries of the North will not be affected by these same dangers. Have we not witnessed terrible forest fires in the United States, Canada, and Australia? Haven't heat waves caused many victims in Europe? Haven't we seen increased frequency and strength in hurricanes as they batter the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic states? We could multiply the examples.

If we maintain the impression that threats only concern the peoples of the South, only a minority of convinced internationalists will understand the danger. However, sooner or later all of humanity will face unprecedented disasters. We must explain to the populations of the North how this threat directly affects them too.

4. Around the year 2100, the temperature is liable to rise by 3.5 degrees C, or an almost unimaginable 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit, above the pre-industrial period.

This is an assertion found in many serious documents — but it seems to me to be both uncertain and, in some ways, a diversion.

From a scientific point of view: We know that climate change is not a linear process. It can suddenly accelerate. Many dimensions of warming have feedbacks, the consequences of which are unpredictable. For example, forest fires emit huge amounts of CO2, which contribute to warming and thus intensify forest fires. If it is therefore difficult to predict what will happen within a few years, how can we pretend to predict what will happen a century away?

From a political point of view: At the end of this century, we will all be dead, as will most of our children and grandchildren. How can we mobilize people's attention and commitment for a future that does not concern them, directly or indirectly? Should we be worried about future generations?

It is a noble thought, argued at length for example by the philosopher Hans Jonas, who explains we have a moral duty towards those who are not yet born. While a minority might be affected by this argument, for most what will happen in 2100 does not interest them very much.

5. By 2050 we will achieve “carbon neutrality.”

This promise from the European Union and various European governments is not a half-truth, nor naïve goodwill — it is pure and simple mystification.

First, instead of committing now to the urgent changes demanded by the scientific community (the authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC) over the next three to four years, our leaders are promising wonders for 2050.

But this is obviously much too late. Moreover, as governments change every four or five years, what is the guarantee for these commitments, with no accountability for those making them, in 30 years' time? It is a grotesque way of justifying present inaction with an untestable promise.

Second, "neutrality" does not mean a drastic reduction in emissions — quite the contrary! This is a misleading calculation based on offsets. Company XY continues to emit CO₂, but plants a forest in Indonesia, supposedly to absorb the equivalent amount of CO₂ — if the forest does not catch fire.

But even these "compensation mechanisms" have already been examined by many ecological NGOs as not being equivalent. This reveals the perfect mystification contained in the promise of "carbon neutrality."

6. Our particular bank (or oil company) finances renewable energies, thus it participates in the "ecological transition."

This commonplace of greenwashing is also based on manipulating "facts." Certainly, banks and multinationals invest in renewable energies, but precise studies by the European environmental and tax justice organization ATTAC and other NGOs have shown that this is a small — sometimes tiny — part of their financial operations.

The bulk of their investment continues to move into oil, coal, gas and other fossil fuels. It is a simple question of profitability and competition for market share.

All "reasonable" governments — unlike Trump, or Bolsonaro in Brazil — also swear that they are committed to the ecological transition and renewable energies. But as soon as there is a problem with the supply of fossil energy — gas recently, because of aggressive Russian policy — they take refuge in coal by reactivating lignite power plants. They implore the (bloody) Saudi Arabian royal family to increase oil production.

Fine speeches about the "ecological transition" obscure an unpleasant truth: it is not enough to develop renewable energies. After all, these are intermittent: the sun does not always shine in northern Europe. Certainly technical advances exist in this area, but they cannot solve everything.

Above all, renewables require mining resources which risk being depleted. If the wind and the sun are unlimited goods, this is not at all the case for all the materials necessary to use them (lithium, copper, etc.).

It will therefore be necessary to consider a reduction in overall energy consumption and a selective decrease. These measures are unimaginable within the framework of capitalist production.

7. Thanks to carbon capture and sequestration techniques, we will avoid climate catastrophe.

This is an argument used more and more by governments, and is even found in certain serious documents (e.g. from the IPCC). It is the illusion of a miracle technological solution, which would save the climate without the need to change anything in our (capitalist) mode of production and in our way of life.

Alas, the sad truth is that these miraculous techniques for capturing and sequestering atmospheric carbon are far from being a reality. Certainly a few attempts have taken place, a few projects underway here and there, but for the moment we cannot say that this technology is effective, efficient or operational.

Nor has technology resolved the difficulties of either capture or sequestration (which happen in underground regions impervious to leaks). And there is no guarantee that in the future it will be able to do so.

8. Thanks to electric cars, we will substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This is yet another example of a half-truth. Yes, electric cars are less polluting than thermal cars (gasoline or diesel), and therefore less ruinous for the health of city residents. However, from a climate change perspective, their record is much more mixed.

They emit less CO₂, but contribute to a disastrous “everything with electricity.” Electricity in most countries is produced with fossil fuels (coal, gas or oil). Reduced emissions from electric cars are “offset” by the increased emissions resulting from greater electricity consumption.

In France, electricity is produced by nuclear energy, another dead end. In Brazil, megadams destroy forests and are therefore responsible for increasing the carbon footprint.

If we want to drastically reduce emissions, we cannot escape a significant reduction in the circulation of private cars. There are more efficient and alternative means of transportation: free public transport, pedestrian zones, cycle paths. The electric car maintains the illusion that we can continue as before just by changing technology.

9. It is through “market mechanisms” such as carbon taxes, or emissions rights markets, or even increasing the price of fossil fuels, that we will be able to reduce CO₂ emissions.

Even some sincere ecologists see these market mechanisms might be a way out. But it too is a mystification. Market mechanisms have demonstrated their complete ineffectiveness in reducing greenhouse gases.

Not only are these anti-social measures that want to make the working classes pay the price of the “ecological transition,” but above all they are incapable of contributing substantially to limiting emissions. The spectacular failure of “carbon markets” established by the Kyoto agreements are the best demonstration of this reality.

It is not through “indirect,” “incentive” measures based on the logic of the capitalist market that can put brakes on the omnipotence of fossil fuels, which indeed have made the system work for two centuries.

To start with, it will be necessary to expropriate the capitalist energy monopolies and create a public energy service with the mission to drastically reduce the exploitation of fossil fuels.

10. Climate change is now inevitable, “we can only adapt.”

We find this kind of fatalistic assertion in the media and among political “leaders.”

For example, Mr. Christophe Bechu, Minister of Ecological Transition in the French Macron government, recently

declared: “Since we will not be able to prevent global warming, whatever our efforts, we must manage to limit its effects while adapting to it.”

This is an excellent recipe to justify abandoning “our efforts” to avoid the worst. However, IPCC scientists have clearly explained that if warming has indeed already started, it is still possible to stay below the red line of 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F) above pre-industrial levels — provided that we immediately begin to very significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

What’s the Conclusion?

Of course we have to try to adapt. But if climate change gets out of control and accelerates, “adaptation” is just an illusion. How do we “adapt” to temperatures of 50° C (122 degrees F)?

We could multiply the examples. All lead to the conclusion that if we want to avoid climate change, we must change the capitalist system and replace it with a more egalitarian form of production and consumption. This necessary direction is what we call Ecosocialism.

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