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Ecology

Earth Summit: can capitalism save the planet?

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The United Nations' World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg, South Africa from August 26 to September 4, 2002. While the decisions of the Rio convention in 1992 have still not been applied, the great powers, in concert with the biggest multinationals, are claiming to promote sustainable development. Who can really believe it? In spite of the immense good will mobilized by this gigantic summit, held under the aegis of the UN, the rules of the game are dictated by the great powers who dominate the planet.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/10_big_globe.jpg]

In Johannesburg, capital was king and the multinationals were omnipresent: two hundred CEOs from the big companies made the trip. French nuclear company EDF hawked its shares alongside British Petroleum in the 'sustainable development village', built near the conference centre. Tony Blair, as green as he is left, included in the British delegation several big employers like Thames Water, a water treatment company condemned for environmental crimes in Britain, or Rio Tinto, the world's biggest mining trust, which is currently trying to win the right to mine uranium on the Australian nature reserve of Kakadu. The poor were ignored, with the protests of landless South Africans meeting with harsh repression.

Far from being anecdotal, this configuration is symptomatic of the changes since the first Earth Summit in Rio ten years ago in 1992. Remember that Rio has often been presented as a source of hope. After the much trumpeted victory of democracy with the collapse of the bureaucratic regimes in eastern Europe and the victory of the rule of law during the Gulf War, this summit seemed to some the proof that global capitalism could prosper without damaging the environment. Ten years later, the balance sheet is as bitter as that of Putin's democracy for the Chechens or the war in defence of international law for the oppressed Iraqis. The defeat is patent. Curiously, everybody seems to recognize it, without really looking for the underlying causes.

Imperialism

To understand, we must rehabilitate that forgotten word, 'imperialism'. The Soviet collapse was the occasion for the US superpower to carry out a global redeployment in which the current war against terrorism is only the latest episode. This reorganization has fully benefited from the dynamic of capitalist globalisation over the past 20 years and its accompanying deregulation and privatisation. Europe, far from being a rampart against this process, has accentuated it. The result has been a spectacular growth of inequality on the planetary scale and a reinforcement of the hierarchies that underpin that inequality. In this process, the environment has not been spared, neither in the North nor in the South.

What has become of the pledges made in Rio and notably the conventions on climatic change and biodiversity, to take the two examples that are most often mentioned? They have been submerged by the market everywhere. While the sombre predictions on climate change seem confirmed, both by the results of scientific studies and by the accumulation of spectacular and dramatic meteorological events, the Kyoto protocol of 1997 on the application of the Rio convention of 1992 has still not been ratified, let alone applied.

Above all, the oil and nuclear lobbies, installed in the White House in the baggage of Bush junior, have ensured the refusal of a ratification of the protocol by the main world polluter, coupled with a resumption of oil prospecting and nuclear development. Australia also refused to ratify the protocol. In any case, the protocol is completely insufficient to check the progress of the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse effect gas. Its application would only be a

limited advance, but even that seems out of the question today. The climate did not constitute an official subject of discussion at Johannesburg. Europe proposed an objective that 15% of energy should be produced from renewable sources. This objective was framed, however, within a perspective of a continued increase in energy consumption both in North and South: it is not, then, sufficient to check the growth of CO2 emissions resulting from the use of fossil fuels.

Biodiversity was, however, on the agenda of the summit. The Rio convention of 1992, far from facilitating its conservation and sustainable use, put in place the mechanisms for commodity exploitation of genetic resources in particular. Although the convention sought to regulate exchanges between North and South to prevent biopiracy, the result 10 years later is hardly conclusive. In the absence of financial resources and the transfer of technology, places of high biodiversity like the Brazilian, African or Indonesian rain forests continue to be exploited intensively and to disappear at an accelerated rhythm. Some thousands of unknown vegetable and animal species are also disappearing every year.

The hypocrisy of 'green' capitalism

The Global Environment Facility, which is supposed to finance sustainable projects, is a derisory amount. Moreover, its objective is to finance the additional expenditure corresponding to the preservation of the environment. As a result, it finances the rectification of environmental damage caused by projects that are often 'sustainable' only in name. The developing countries often have no other choice than to bargain with the multinationals over the price of their exploitation. The transfers of technology that take place often only allow an improvement in the conditions of this exploitation, in which the main beneficiary is the richer partner.

No new convention is to come out of the Johannesburg summit; instead, there is to be a plan of action situated within an explicitly free trade perspective, referring to the commitments of the WTO conference at Doha in Qatar. After the defeat of Agenda 21 - the long list of recommendations approved in Rio - the UN's theme now is the promotion of 'type 1 and type 2 initiatives'. The latter groups actions of sustainable development involving 'civil society', including the multinationals, who have been strongly encouraged by the UN to participate in the vast 'Global compact' programme launched in 1999.

The multinationals are fond of these projects which give them a green label, and can lead to co-financing or support for purely lucrative operations whose ecological benefits are to say the least debatable. Thus Shell is involved in gas prospecting in the Philippines; Croplife International, a grouping of companies making genetically modified organisms and plant protection products, is responsible for a programme of training in the use of pesticides and so on. There is not even any need to finance a genuinely 'sustainable' project. Sustainable development has become a vector of legitimation for the penetration of the markets of the South by the big companies, including the most polluting.

Type 1 initiatives, which involve the public sector, are not necessarily any better. Here again, the states back operations that favour, directly or eventually, industrial and commercial interests. The US has thus just announced its participation in an initiative for the preservation of the Congo forest basin, obviously without any link to the potential exploitation of the rich oil resources of the region.

Johannesburg marks the hypocritical advent of a 'green' capitalism, supposedly capable of saving the planet. The commitments made have no chance of being adhered to, any more than those of Rio or the FAO summits on world hunger. When the deregulation of trade is not challenged and WTO accords take priority over the preservation of the environment, the latter will continue to be devastated.