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Europe

Europe's ecological challenge

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Maastricht Europe neither can, nor wants, to attack the roots of the ecological crisis. But political ecology is not just about inter-generation solidarity, or solidarity with the people of the south. The current living conditions of the populations of Europe are also every directly in question.

The degradation of the environment has disastrous consequences on public health, and deepens social inequality. Meanwhile, the economic powers which are responsible escape effective control by the citizenry. Under the neo-liberal stick, ecological, social and democratic issues have never seemed so closely linked.

Remember the Rio summit? That great media-feast five years ago, with its solemn promises and lyrical monologues? The governments of the EU were all keen to come to the podium and say their piece. Confronted with the undiplomatic brutality of the USA, they hinted, Europe's natural destiny was to promote durable development, and protective relationships towards the third world countries. On 1 March this year, the "Rio+5" conference approved the Earth Charter, but in a climate of general indifference among rulers, and unaware to the ruled.

Shrinking biodiversity

Europe's biodiversity is shrinking fast. The continent is rich and powerful, but the "practical means" to stop the decline are supposedly lacking. A recent study by Birdlife International (Conservation Series 3) reported that 40% of bird species are in an "unfavourable situation." In the last 20 years, one in four of the continent's 514 bird species has suffered a "substantial reduction" in numbers. And yet these are the years in which most conservation efforts have been made. European legislation has been reinforced, the number of nature reserves and national parks has grown considerably, and a number of species have been reintroduced after disappearing locally.

Some success has been made, which shows that human action can make a difference. But overall, the measures taken have clearly been insufficient. Not just for birds, but for the other animals, and for plant life. Birdlife International concludes that we must "fundamentally re-evaluate agricultural and land use policies." The basic problem is that "our overall conception of economic development (in agriculture, in territorial development, land re-conversion and the drying out of waterlogged regions) is responsible for the decline in bio-diversity in Europe. To solve this problem we must go beyond the creation of protected zones and the local re-introduction of extinct species. Biodiversity protection policies must be integrated into allspheres of economic activity."

The EU's "monolithic" Common Agricultural Policy is the largest single factor behind the decline in biodiversity, according to the report. The loss of biodiversity is not recorded as a cost in the CAP system. But all intensely managed environments, including urban regions, are also affected. The disappearance of the countryside, the extinction of species of plants and animals, the standardisation and artificialisation of the framework of our lives, all this reduces the fields within which we can be active. In other words, the loss of biodiversity leads to the impoverishment of our civilisation.

Natural heritage is also a scientific heritage. It contains a treasure of knowledge and discoveries, in medicine and industry. It is also a living resource which is essential for the preservation of our basic living conditions in the long term. It is essential to maintain its diversity. Each new catastrophic flood, caused by past human interventions, reminds us of the cost of neglect. So does the qualitative aggravation of urban and rural pollution, with its social

consequences in terms of sickness, declining access to drinking water, and so on. The evolution of the climate is frankly alarming.

The effects are already visible

The consequences of the decline in the environment have been felt in the developed countries as well as the third world in recent years. Take health. Recent studies suggest that hundreds of people die every year in the major cities of Europe as a result of atmospheric pollution caused by excessive automobile traffic. Many more people suffer chronic asthma, again as a result of car exhaust emissions. The high incidence of leukaemia among young people living near the nuclear waste recycling and storage centre near the Hague, Holland, needs no commentary.

Babies and very young children who are exposed to industrial pollution will bear the marks all through their lives. Medically and socially.

Water resources are running dangerously low, and the quality of remaining sources is declining. As a result, the price of water is rising rapidly, to the point where a growing number of families are being disconnected from the municipal water supply, because they are unable to pay their bills. Some of the poorest people in Europe have to drink mineral water, because the taps in their apartments are dry!

In these conditions, why is ecological sense still not centre-stage? As far as biodiversity is concerned, ecological demands in Europe, as elsewhere, confront the underlying logic of a market system dominated by large, powerful private interests.

Capital versus the environment

Ecological consciousness, vigilance and activity vary considerably between the EU member states. Overall, however, people have an instrumentalist conception of nature. Sometimes, the state imposes limits on democracy, particularly where the country has nuclear weapons, and nuclear fuel.

A technocratic corps has direct access to the top spheres of the administration, and has established organic links with public and private sector industrialists. A series of key economic sectors work in a directly anti-ecological way: chemicals, agro-foodstuffs, automobile, civil and military nuclear, construction, public works, leisure, market management of natural resources, and the powerful and reactionary hunters' associations.

Each of these lobbies intervenes actively in politics, mobilising enormous financial resources to squash any signs of ecological opposition, and block democratic choice. When he came to power in 1981, President Mitterand promised French voters a "great debate" on the country's energy policies. It never happened. And for years, the country's nuclear bureaucracy has carried out a mass brainwashing campaign, based on paid television advertising, and aiming to wipe out all memories of the Chernobyl disaster, and the failure of the Superphenix generator, destined to become the jewel of the French nuclear industry. So much for the right of citizens to decide on their own future.

Governments rarely hesitate before breaking their own laws on the environment, where the interests of these powerful lobbies demand it. They have even less hesitation where European regulations are concerned.

In any case, the control of vital resources like water increasingly escapes any form of public control, at the local or national level. States have proved incapable of preventing the major agro-businesses from drawing excessive amounts of water from underground reserves, and increasing soil and water pollution. Where water is still under public control, its management is increasingly delegated to large private companies.

These same companies are expanding into the banking sector, and the communications industry. They are involved in huge international manoeuvres, where the search for profit and the search for power are closely linked. Any notion of public service is foreign to them. And yet, they are responsible for water, a public good. This privatisation of a vital resource has already had considerable ecological and social consequences: decline of the environment, large increases in the price of drinking water, and a loss of control of local authorities over their immediate environment.

Ecological demands confront the blind logic of the market, in which only "effective" (cash-backed) demand is important, which ignores the most pressing human needs unless they can be expressed as buying power, and which is completely uninterested in the 'price-less' equilibrium between human society and biosphere. But ecological demands also confront specific capitalists, often the most powerful. Private interests which systematically intervene to prevent the implementation of public policies which threaten to reduce their profits and power.

In other words, political ecology is not something which intervenes on the edge of capitalism, or in an undetermined zone of consensus and reasonable compromise. Ecological demands touch the very heart of the system. This is why they encounter such deep resistance. And why they can and should be integrated into our project for an global alternative society.

Projects for an alternative society

A sector of the peasantry, which has resisted the destructive transformation of the rural world since the 1960s, today not only struggles for the protection of small producers against the major agro-industrial groups, but challenges the dominant notions of "progress" and "modernisation". Without falling into nostalgia, radical peasant groups have recently popularised a renovated concept of "peasant agriculture," at the same time as the larger rural unions, particularly those controlled by the big cereal producers, have completely accepted the dominant model of agro-industrial development. In the countryside, there are two clearly opposed projects for the society of the future.

The development of the agro-foodstuffs industry implies the standardisation of the countryside, and increasingly artificial methods of production. The creation of giant production units, and the exponential increase of chemical intervention in farming. The continued exhaustion of vital resources. All of which combines to reduce Europe's biodiversity, increase pollution, reduce the quality of foodstuffs, create new risks and new epidemics, and reduce the living conditions of the poorest.

It also implies the continuation of the massive rural exodus which feeds mass unemployment in urban areas. Entire regions of the European countryside are becoming a human desert. The socio-economic tissue of these regions is being torn apart, and public services are disappearing.

The necessity to export at all costs means making the people of the third world dependent on "our" food exports. This truly imperialist dependency is one of the most serious problems facing several third world countries. Vital markets are coming under the domination of the agribusiness barons. The law of profit is increasing its kingdom. Subsistence agriculture, political independence and original patterns of agricultural production are being overturned. A real cultural manipulation .

Progressive peasants' movements have the responses to these problems. The answer combines ecological questions (like diversity), social issues (like health and employment), democratic demands (limiting the control of agro-business over rural areas) and internationalism (recognising the right of the peoples of the south to food self-sufficiency and cultural authenticity).

This critique of the basis of the dominant model of development is applicable not just to the EU's agricultural policies, but to its overall conception of "growth," as something dominated and guaranteed by the largest conglomerates. Former European Commission President Jacques Delors was obsessed with a huge plan of public works of doubtful social utility, and prohibitive ecological costs, but representing considerable profits for key interests, if only the EU could find the finances.

Unifying the struggles

Ecological demands have often been considered a "luxury," or at least a secondary priority, given the urgent social crisis. And yet, in the north and the south, we can already feel the implications of the ecological crisis, touching a growing range of aspects of our conditions of life.

Ecological issues are issues for today, not just the future. That was true yesterday, it is even more true today. The neo-liberal offensive contained within the Maastricht Treaty, and, at the global level, within the framework set by the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation, is an offensive in all areas of life. Logically, we should adapt the conditions of struggle in all areas.

This neo-liberal offensive facilitates the convergence of social, democratic and ecological struggles, which increasingly confront a universal, anti-human logic. "Ecological questions" are everywhere emerging, disguised as questions of public health, new social inequalities, and Europe's growing "democratic deficit." Consciousness is evolving! What Chernobyl did for the nuclear question, "mad cow disease" is doing for agro-productivism..

The project of an alternative society is slowly being re-born, though the road ahead is still long. This is a tremendous opportunity, providing that the ecological reference-point does not disappear, with environmental issues being presented as social and democratic issues. Because it is precisely the ecological reference which forces us to systematically rethink the evolving relationship between human societies and nature. A process of reflection which is far from complete, and from which revolutionary socialist currents must not be absent.