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Book review

“Green Capitalism: why it can’t work”: A book to stimulate discussion

- Debate - Ecology -

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This is an important work and should be widely read by anyone concerned about ecological destruction and climate change. It is packed with facts and analysis to make campaigning more effective. It is not, however, uncontroversial—at least from my point of view. This rather lengthy review, therefore, will seek both to draw out the strengths of the book and to take up those aspects that I regard as problematic.

Not that these problematic issues are confined to this book. Many of them are widely held views amongst left, and amongst environmentalists, and in some cases the majority view. This review is therefore, also, a part of a wider discussion.

Strengths

The strengths of the book are clear enough. It is written from a revolutionary socialist and an ecosocialist standpoint. It analyses the functioning of capitalism as both the driving force of the ecological crisis and global warming and the primary obstacle to tackling it.

It points out that global warming is reaching a tipping point, after which feedback mechanisms are likely to cause the process to run out of control. It quotes Ban Ki-Moon as saying: “We have our feet glued to the accelerator and are hurtling towards the abyss”. To avoid this happening, it argues, along with the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that carbon emissions will have to be reduced by between 25% and 40% by 2020 and by between 50% and 80% by 2050. They would have to reach zero, or even become negative, by the end of the century.

It calls for a transition to renewable energy irrespective of cost and for a major reduction in energy use through conservation, particularly in the advanced countries of the West.

It calls for a break from productivism (the drive for growth) and for the predominance of use values over exchange values. It points out that: “200 years of ‘productivism’ have brought the climate system to the brink of collapse. In certain areas—small island-states, the Arctic regions, the arid zones, mountain valleys where the water flow is disrupted by melting glaciers—the tipping point has already been reached. In order to prevent climate change spiralling out of control and affecting hundreds of millions of people, greenhouse gas emissions must be drastically reduced.” (Page 15)

It advocates: “Reducing global production by reducing the length of the working week and eliminating the production of useless and harmful goods; Reducing the amount of transport used by a substantial amount (which implies the reallocation of production); A radical increase in energy efficiency and a complete transition to renewables regardless of cost”. (Page 124)

It has an extensive analysis of the role of the IPCC and the failure of the UN Climate Change (COP) conferences that have been going on since the mid-1990s. It looks at the failure to implement the Kyoto Protocol since 2005 and the failure to achieve a binding international treaty on carbon emissions.

It argues, at the same time, that any international agreement to reduce carbon emissions must be based on social justice, particularly in relation to the emerging economies: “How can the climate be stabilised while the legitimate rights to development are recognised of those who have nothing, or very little, and who are at the same time the

main victims of global warming? This is the problem of the century.” (Page 15)

The science of climate change

Daniel Tanuro’s book is at its strongest when it comes to an analysis of the science of climate change and its consequences. It argues that the evidence that global warming is happening and is caused mainly by the burning of fossil fuels, is now conclusive. It spells out the consequences that even a small increase in the average global temperature would have (and is having) on the planet:

“An increase of 1Å°C in the 21st century would lead to intensified drought in the sub-tropical regions and a decrease in the productivity of certain cereal crops in semi-arid tropical regions. In the event of an increase of 2Å°C, millions more people each year would be subjected to coastal flooding. In the event of a rise of 3.5Å°C, there would be widespread reduction in agricultural productivity for all cereal crops, in all latitudes.” (Page 33)

“In certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa, the productivity of land that is not irrigated could even drop by 50% in the next 20 years. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation: “in around forty poor countries, with a population of two billion, of whom 450 million suffer from famine, loss of agricultural production resulting from climate change would dramatically increase the number of people suffering from malnutrition.”” (Page 33)

It points to the growing phenomenon of climate refugees, pointing out that in 1999 for the first time the number of people displaced by climate generated events surpassed those displaced by war.

It has an impressive section on the melting of the ice sheets and the resulting sea level rise. Tanuro points out that the IPCC projection is that a 2Å°C rise in temperature over preindustrial levels would generate a rise in the sea level of between 0.4m and 1.4m. He believes, however, that even the higher figure is conservative because it does not take into account the dynamic and destabilising process generated by melting ice that is taking place within the Greenland ice cap which could dramatically affect such calculations.

It says the following: “During the summer months, the diurnal temperature in the Polar Regions rises slightly above zero, causing vast reservoirs of water to form on the surface of the ice caps, which create ruts in the ice. In Greenland, where the ice cap contains enough water to cause a rise in the sea-level of about 6 metres, researchers have seen a ‘lake’ three kilometres wide empty in 90 minutes, like an ordinary wash basin. Now, if water suddenly sinks through the crevasses of the glaciers into the rock at the base, it could cause enormous masses of ice to break off, which would in turn cause a sharp rise in the sea level if they slipped into the ocean.” (Page 37)

At the same time it points to the destabilisation of the Western Antarctic ice sheet that threatens an even greater rise in sea levels. Recent reports, 5 years after Tanuro’s book was first published in French, demonstrate that this ice sheet is indeed destabilising faster than previously expected and strongly confirm his analysis.

The biggest threat

More controversial, however, is the conclusion Tanuro draws from the disappearing ice: that sea level rise is the biggest single threat from global warming. It is certainly a massive threat, of course. Most of the planet’s human population (as Tanuro points out) live in low-lying coastal plains and river deltas that are highly vulnerable. Vast

areas (in Bangladesh for example) would be under water and the population pushed back into already overpopulated regions. Large tracts of the most productive food producing land would disappear under the sea.

There is another threat, however, which is arguably greater, and which the book, in my view, underestimates. This is the crisis of biodiversity, or the ‘sixth extinction’, as it is increasingly known. (The previous such extinction – the fifth – took place 65 million years ago wiping out the dinosaurs and destroying 70% of all species on the planet at that time.)

Today around 50 percent of all species (plants and animals) are threatened with extinction. The cause of this is not just global warming. It is habitat loss on an industrial scale along with pollution, including the acidification of the oceans, which is taking place at an alarming rate.

Elisabeth Kolbert, in her book *The Sixth Extinction – an Unnatural History*, along with ecologist Eugene Stoermer and others, argues that the crisis of biodiversity is so great that it defines a new geological epoch: the epoch of the anthropocene. An epoch defined by the impact of human activity on the biodiversity of the planet. I think she makes a strong case. My review of Kolbert’s book is [here](#).

Tanuro agrees that the crisis of biodiversity is very serious and accepts the concept of the sixth extinction. He even complains (rightly) that it is a subject that is not taken seriously enough by the left or the ecological movement. By presiding over species destruction on this scale, he argues, we as human beings are ‘cutting off the branch we are sitting on’. (Page 39)

Having said this, however, he fails, overall, in my view, to give the biodiversity crisis the centrality it should have.

Is global warming anthropogenic?

This underestimation of the biodiversity crisis is also reflected in the question mark Tanuro raises over the characterisation of global warming as ‘anthropogenic’: i.e. caused primarily by human activity. It is not, he argues, a product of human activity as such but of capitalism as a system. It is caused, he argues by: “over-production which leads to over-consumption on the one hand and growing poverty and under-consumption on the other. In the final analysis, therefore, it is a social crisis and it would be infinitely more accurate to refer to capitalist climate change instead of ‘anthropogenic’ climate change.” [My emphasis] (Page 48)

Confusingly he accepts earlier that the term anthropogenic is not “entirely incorrect” and that human beings do, indeed, have a far greater impact on the environment than any other species. (Page 45)

He goes on to ignore this, however, and to argue that to characterise global warming as anthropogenic is a diversion from the real issues. People, he says: “ramble on about ‘anthropogenic’ global warming in order to make consumers feel guilty and encourage them to buy water heaters labelled ‘Energy Plus’.” And further on: “The expression ‘anthropogenic’ global warming alone suffices to distract attention from structural mechanisms and focus on individual behaviour.” (Page 51)

This is wrong, in my view, both in terms of global warming and of the ecological crisis as a whole. (I make this distinction because whilst global warming is the overarching feature of the ecological crisis it cannot be reduced to it). In fact capitalism – along with the steam engine, the internal combustion engine, and the industrial revolution itself (and later nuclear technology) – were a creation of human beings.

Tanuro also claims that earlier (pre-industrial) societies are not responsible for global warming. (Page 41) This might be true of global warming but it is not true of the ecological crisis as a whole. Since modern humans emerged 200,000 years ago, they have always had a disproportionate and destructive impact on both the environment and other species.

Modern humans are the most, successful, and rapacious species the planet has produced. They were responsible for the demise of many of the large mammals that had no other predators but were vulnerable to the hunting skills modern humans. They have reshaped the landscapes, and the habitats of other species, in irreversible ways. In my view, therefore, ‘anthropogenic’ is clearly the right way to define the ecological crisis. As argued above, there is a strong case for defining the current geological epoch as such – i.e. the epoch of the anthropocene.

Capitalism and the environment

Tanuro argues that: “it seems reasonable to assume that if humanity had not taken the capitalist road it would have been better able to hear signals from the environment and to correct its practices accordingly.” (Page 11)

But is this true? Whilst it is important to take the destructive capacity of capitalism fully into account, neither the environment crisis as a whole, or global warming, can be reduced to it.

It is true that this destructive capacity increased dramatically with the industrial revolution, and the capitalist mode of production, in the latter part of the 18th century. It did, however, precede both industrialisation and capitalism and could well continue after capitalism unless conscious action is taken to avoid it. In fact for 70 years during the 20th century capitalism and its profit motive ceased to exist in a third of the world yet, the impact on the environment was even more severe in the countries concerned.

The ecological record of the USSR was disastrous: polluted rivers, deforestation, the dustbowls created by the virgin lands project, polluted landscapes, noxious brown coal smokestack emissions, chemical lakes, and Chernobyl. Stalin, and those who followed him, were also thoroughly productivist. In fact what they created was productivism gone mad. They also saw the “conquering” of nature as the central objective.

Yet it did not start like that. Although he wanted to increase Soviet Russia’s productive power, Lenin thought that nature had to be respected. Soon after the revolution a number of decrees were adopted to protect the forests from development, and protected zones were established to control erosion and protect watercourses. Hunting for fur was restricted. In 1921 a number of nature reserves were established and areas excluded from industrial development. Scientific study of the biosphere was encouraged. Stalin reversed all this with the consequences outlined above.

Maoist China followed the Stalinist model both in terms of productivism and disregard of the environment. Whilst there were also some early environmental measures soon after the revolution Mao was soon talking about the need to conquer nature. Both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were environmentally disastrous as well as productivist. Production targets were set, forests and pastures were destroyed, rivers diverted, lakes filled in and man-made plains created to grow grain. There was a direct connection with the USSR as well. The disastrous Three Gorges Dam project, on the Yellow river, was overseen by soviet engineers, as was the Yangtze dam project.

The environmental record of the Mao regime was at least as destructive as that of Imperial China that preceded it and the particularly the rabid form of capitalism that followed it.

Eastern Europe was also a disaster area under Stalinism. East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania all had industrial complexes belching out pollution in an uncontrolled way and burning vast quantities of brown coal.

Daniel Tanuro discusses the record of the Stalinist states (and makes similar points) but fails to draw the logical conclusion. That any form of industrialised human society will be highly destructive to the environment unless it is consciously created and shaped to be otherwise. That, for me, is the most fundamental case for ecosocialism.

There is another problem, as well, with reducing the ecological crisis to capitalism. That is that it suggests that that the removal of capitalism would resolve the crisis, which in my view would be a big mistake. It would certainly create far better conditions to tackle the crisis, it would, however, remain a huge challenge even after a socialist transformation—and with no guarantee of success.

Population

For me the most disturbing parts of the book are the various references to the issue of population. It perpetuates the widespread (and long held) approach on the left, where, rather than discuss the issue of population as such it denigrates, in the harshest terms those, like myself, who think the issue is important, and try to raise a wider discussion on it. We are denounced as reactionary or worse (much worse in fact), making population effectively a taboo subject.

The book argues that the size of the human population is irrelevant, has no implications for the ecology of the planet, and that even to discuss the subject is reactionary in the extreme. In my view this is a staggeringly complacent approach.

It drags up the usual (irrelevant) reference to Thomas Malthus and describes those who think that population is an important issue as people who: “find it easier to challenge the right of part of humanity to exist than to challenge capitalism”. Such people it says: “should not be underestimated with their reactionary rantings, as they are beating a path to the highest levels of the ruling class. There is no need to look for a conspiracy: capitalism itself points the way to barbarism.” (Page 17)

It gets even more offensive (frankly) when it comes to the issue of the carrying capacity of the planet—i.e. the (perfectly reasonable) concept that there is a limit to the size of the human population that the planet can cope with without straining its finite resources to breaking point and/or doing serious damage both to its biosphere and to the human population itself. Such a discussion it says: “has no relevance for the analysis of social relations between humanity and nature and is used to support a despicable socio-political project—the large-scale extermination of the poor.” (Page 100)

This review does not have the scope to respond in detail to such remarkable (and objectionable) allegations. A full exposition of my views on population, however, can be found [here](#).

The fact is that the global population has almost tripled in the last 60 years—from 2.5bn in 1950 to over 7bn today! This is an increase of around 80 million people every year! And this rate of increase shows no signs of slowing down. According to UN estimates the global population will reach somewhere between 8 and 11 billion by mid-century. At the same time the per capita consumption of food, water, and manufactured goods is increasing even faster than the population itself.

It is true that reducing population growth would not have a major effect on global warming because (as the book points out) the highest birth rates are in the most impoverished countries with the lowest per capita carbon footprints (of around 1 metric tonne a year).

This misses the point, however, firstly because the impact of those populations is much greater when it comes to their ecological footprint (i.e. their total impact on the environment rather than simply on emissions) and second because (quite rightly) such impoverished populations aspire to change their economic situation in the time scale involved—and we fully support them in doing so. The carbon footprint of the Chinese population, for example, has risen to 7 metric tonnes after just 2 decades of capitalist development.

Nor am I arguing that population stabilisation would, in itself, resolve the ecological crisis. This will need a wide range of ecological, economic and social measures if it is to be achieved. The task however, would be easier if the global population was stabilised rather than if it continued to rise.

We should, of course, oppose all forms of population control (i.e. any form of coercion) and seek to stabilise the population through first and foremost the empowerment of women. In my view most women in the impoverished South, if they had free choice, would not have the large families that generally prevail. Some would (which is also their choice), most would not.

Empowerment would mean giving women (globally) the ability to control their own fertility. If this went alongside access to education and jobs, and the chance to shed the influences of patriarchy and religion, fertility rates would fall further and the global rate of increase would start to fall. It would also improve the lives of millions of women in the process.

It is also necessary, alongside this, to make the whole population aware that the size of the population matters and that this should be taken into account when they are choosing the size of their families.

In my view the left needs to engage with this debate and get beyond the outdated prejudices, of the past. Marxism should have no taboo subjects—it is a contradiction in terms. Human beings are a part of nature and have both a need and an obligation to live in harmony with it. We share a fragile planet with other species and we should seek to live alongside them without threatening their existence (and therefore our own) on an industrial scale, as is currently the case.

Should pollution be taxed?

The book is strongly opposed to carbon taxes (i.e. taxing pollution), which it sees uniformly as market mechanisms. It is certainly right to oppose such taxes when they don’t work or when they are regressive as is the case with the various carbon trading schemes promoted by Kyoto and the UN. The Clean Development Mechanism, the Joint Implementation Mechanism, and the EU Emissions Trading Scheme are examples of this. At best they are window-dressing. At worst they are a license to pollute and make profit at the same time.

The book is rightly critical of the carbon tax attempted by Sarkozy in France of 2009 (mainly on petrol diesel and heating fuel) that was met mass with protests from haulage contractors, fishermen, and others. It was deeply flawed with unacceptable exemptions for big manufacturers. It was eventually declared unconstitutional on the grounds that it breached the principle that taxation should be evenly and fairly borne.

It is wrong, however, in my view, to oppose carbon taxes where they are effective and also progressive – i.e. where they do reduce emissions and where they do not discriminate against the poor.

The book, however, puts the following argument against such taxes: “Let us suppose for a moment a hypothesis from political fiction – that a strong global power were able to impose an overall price for CO₂ related to climate constraints. It is obvious that then the large corporations would pass the cost on to the end-users. In the knowledge that the burning of a tonne of diesel fuel emits 2.7 tonnes of CO₂, everyone can do their own calculations and conclude that setting a price (or levying a tax) of 500 dollars per tonne would abruptly diminish the disposable income of the majority of the population to a very significant degree.” (Page 68)

Capitalist enterprises will indeed pass such costs on to their customers, if they can get away with it. But carbon taxes don’t have to be that way. They can be effective and they can be progressive.

An interesting proposal that addresses both the issue of placing a carbon tax in a progressive framework and also (therefore) the vexed issue of winning popular support for radical measures to reduce emissions is the fee and dividend scheme (or exit strategy) proposed by the climate scientist and environmental campaigner James Hansen. It deserves to be at least considered by the left. Hansen’s proposal not only generates low carbon life-styles but transfers wealth from the rich to the poor in the process. (See my article at <http://socialistresistance.org/6171/james-hansens-exit-strategy-from-global-warming>)

Hansen argues that at the moment no one on the left is proposing a solution that would provide an exit strategy from fossil fuels in the timescale available before the tipping point or in a way that would command popular support.

Under his proposal a fee (or a tax) would be levied at source on the fossil fuel companies for each ton of carbon they produce. This would increase the price of goods that had been manufactured and/or transported by fossil fuel. The fee would start low and be increased annually until renewable energy was competitive with fossil fuel.

Under the dividend part of the scheme the money collected each month would be divided equally between the residents of the country and paid directly into their bank accounts or onto an electronic card. Those who reduced their carbon footprint the most would benefit the most. They could do this by low carbon expenditure choices and by changing over to energy efficient appliances, upgrading their insulation and switching to green energy sources that would become cheaper than fossil fuels. At the end of the day under Hansen’s proposal 60% of the population would be better off, which should contribute to popular support.

Another strength of Hansen’s proposal is that it would stand a far better chance of winning a popular mandate for radical changes than anything else being proposed. This is because it is based on social justice as expressed in its redistributive effect from the rich to the poor. J B Foster puts it this way: “there is no possibility of instituting an effective carbon price without an approach that takes into account class and power inequalities, and basic issues of justice”.

Not that carbon taxes are new. In fact major carbon taxes, on petrol and diesel for example, are already in widespread use, including in France and Britain. No one on the left, as far as I am aware, is proposing that they are abolished. In fact they should be defended and extended to aviation fuel that is currently (and scandalously) exempt under conditions where high altitude is the most damaging place to burn fossil fuel.

Carbon taxes, of course, can never be an answer, in and of themselves, to defending the environment. Hansen makes this very clear with his proposals. Many other measures would be needed alongside such taxes. But they are a measure that can be used to curb pollution, and we should support them where they are effective and progressive

and are used as a part of a wider package of measures.

There is another problem as well involved in this debate. If you find fault with every proposal to curb pollution that does not meet the full set of criteria you choose to place on it you end up not curbing pollution but ensuring that the status quo remains.

Personal responsibility (or not)

Reflecting the debates around carbon taxes is the issue of whether the individual has (or should have) any responsibility for his or her personal ecological footprint, or does such responsibility reside simply at corporate and governmental level. Also whether individual action is of any value in protecting the environment.

Although the book starts by conceding that individual action “might be of some use” it then goes on to argue strongly it is at best a diversion. It says the following:

“The media is full of the efforts that each of us ought to make to consume less energy such as using low energy light bulbs, turning the thermostat down, reducing car usage, putting a lid on saucepans, etc. Although this advice is of some use, and should be followed as far as possible and without moralising, it distracts our attention from the fact that the energy system is characterised by structural waste far more significant than wastage caused by individual behaviour. The cause of this waste is once again the pursuit of profit.” (Page 48)

Later it says: “In order to emerge from the ecological crisis we are told our first priority should be to stay quietly in our place in society and take personal responsibility for changing our ‘lifestyle’. Businesses should produce green technologies and consumers should use them. Within this framework, there is no longer any question of modifying social relations. The campaign to stabilise the climate becomes essentially a personal matter of ethics, moderation, humility, even asceticism. Class, social inequality, capitalist lobbies and power structures disappear from the stage as if by magic, in favour of making individuals feel guilty.” (Page 51)

I don’t agree with this. I am not even sure that the media is full of such appeals. In Britain, at least, most of the newspapers ridicule individual measures against pollution along with what they call political correctness.

In my view there is a personal (or individual) responsibility involved (where the individual has such choices) for both our carbon and ecological footprints, and it is not in any way moralising to recognise this. Energy use in the home, for example, where there is a lot of scope for personal choices, represents around 40% of all energy use.

In fact ‘using low energy light bulbs, turning the thermostat down, reducing car usage, and putting a lid on saucepans’ (that are trivialised in the book) are very important considerations that use large amounts of energy as is the way we feed ourselves and use air travel, particularly short haul flights.

Personal responsibility should not, of course, be counterpoised to corporate or governmental responsibility. Big business is the primary polluters the main responsibility is with government to set the framework of an environmental policy but there is an individual responsibility as well.

In any case if people fail to take their personal ecological footprint seriously how can they be effective advocates or fighters to defend the environment in general? It is a contradiction in terms.

It’ll be OK after the revolution

There is a more strategic point about the book as well. This is that it is not clear what Tanuro means by the ‘impossibility of green capitalism’.

If he means that capitalism, left to its own devices, with its drive for profit and growth, and its addiction to fossil fuels, will destroy the ecosystem of the planet, then that is true. If he means that capitalism is the biggest single obstacle to the defence of the environment, then that is also true. The capitalist mode of production and ecological sustainability are indeed ultimately incompatible.

If he means, however that it is impossible to win any significant measures to protect the environment, or stabilise global warming, whilst capitalism still exists – which appears to be the case – then there is a problem, since, as the book accepts, there are few signs that capitalism is about to be ended world-wide in the timescale involved: i.e. in the next few decades.

It true that the book is not consistent on this. On page 73, for example, it argues against those who say that little (or nothing) can be done until after the revolution – yet its overarching message is to the contrary: that, actually, little of significance can be done while capitalism continues to exist. On page 105, for example, it says that we would be deluded to think that major change was possible whilst capitalism still exists.

It puts it this way: “... we would be talking about a form of capitalism in which the law of value was no longer in operation, which is a contradiction in terms. To imagine that a mode of production based on this law could cease to exploit natural resources is as absurd as to imagine that it could cease to exploit the labour force.”

It is true that the struggle to defend the environment under capitalism is difficult. But so is the struggle against poverty and for human rights, social justice, women’s liberation, and against racism or homophobia. We don’t say that that these struggles are impossible short of revolution. We fight for these things today as a part of the struggle for a socialist society. In any case there have already been important environmental victories – over airport expansion, for example, and against nuclear power in Germany and Japan. The ozone layer has been saved, for now at least, by an 80% reduction in the use of CFCs.

The book goes on to argue, however, that the problem when it comes to the environment the same agency for change does not exist: i.e. that the workers’ movement is not involved and that environmental campaigners are something separate. Those struggling to defend the environment, it argues (which it defines as ‘supporters of ‘green capitalism’), will never be able to replicate the heroic struggles that the workers movement has historically mounted over economic exploitation, instead they will circumscribe reformism.

It puts it this way: “Supporters of ‘green capitalism’ have nothing in common with the workers who have stepped forward to organise the fight against exploitation, often in peril of their lives. The proponents of ‘green capitalism’ do not rely on social mobilisation or on confrontation with capital, but on lobbying within the dominant social class and on participating in government. Nevertheless, the comparison with the workers’ movement remains pertinent since this strategy, mutatis mutandis, is that of the right-wing social democracy. There is furthermore a willingness to believe that capitalism can meet ecological challenges, rather like the social democrats of the previous century wanted to believe that capitalism could meet social challenges.” (Page 113)

This is not only a false distinction, but a misunderstanding of the character of the ecological struggle. In fact the economic and environmental struggles are one and the same with the same key agencies for change: the working class and the oppressed who are the most harshly effected by climate change (extreme weather) and environmental destruction and pollution.

It is also a Eurocentric view since it dismisses the mass struggles, including those of indigenous peoples, in the Global South that have taken place (and are taking place) against dam developments, over water rights, and against the incursion of extractive industries. Many of these have been as bitterly fought as struggles over economic issues and often by the same people.

The harsh reality is that waiting for the revolution is not an option given the time-scale involved and the depth of the crisis. We have to fight for measures, here and now, under capitalism, as a part of a revolutionary programme that can stabilise the climate and defend the environment—despite the reactionary nature of the capitalist system. Otherwise by the time a social overturn takes place there will be little of the biosphere left for the working class to inherit.

Waiting until after the revolution not only leaves the status quo in place, but denies a strategy to achieve revolution. If you can’t create the balance of forces to win concessions under capitalism how can you create the conditions for social revolution?

The transitional method

This locates the main problem with the book in my view. When it comes to solutions to the problems of the environment the book is effectively maximalist rather than transitional. It misses out the key link between the day-to-day struggles, whether they are economic or environmental, and the strategic objective—which is the transitional method and transitional demands.

In fact the concept of transitional demands hardly feature in the book at all. It does have demands for the here and now, of course (as quoted above from page 124 for example), but it has no framework for achieving them.

The only mention of transitional demands is in the section on productivism where it argues (rightly) that productivism is so integral to capitalism that it could not conceivably exist without it. The reference, however, is not to say that the demand for an end to productivism is an important transitional demand (as I would argue) but to say that it is NOT a transitional demand.

The book does contain other transitional demands, as well, such as a major reduction in the working week, but they are not put forward in the framework of demands that can change the relationship of forces whilst capitalism (and as a part of a revolutionary process) but in the framework that actually such demands are not achievable under capitalism.

Its clear what we need. We need an end to productivism, a complete change to renewable energy, a huge programme of energy conservation, an integrated transport policy, a big reduction in the use of the car, the localisation of food production, a reduction in meat consumption, the protection of habitats of vulnerable species—the list could go on.

The problem, however, is how to get such measures accepted and implemented in a remotely relevant timetable, and how to generate popular support to ensure their introduction. At the moment the problem of an effective exit strategy from fossil fuel energy remains unresolved on the wider left and in my view remains unresolved in this book.

In conclusion

In conclusion I want to stress again the positive points of the book and the important contribution it can make to the struggle. It has a lot to offer particularly in terms of its analysis of capitalism, the science of climate change, and the international agencies that are supposed to be tackling it. There are also many aspects that I have not been able to mention in the course of this review, for example that it opposes nuclear power, Biofuels, and genetically modified food.

The fact is, however, the issues I have raised are all current debates on the left and amongst environmentalists. Hopefully, therefore, this review can generate some wider discussion on both the book itself and the issues that I have raised.

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