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Reflection on a series of disasters

Tsunami, Katrina, Kashmir: Element of political reflection on a series of natural disasters

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How should Marxists approach the question of so-called 'natural' disasters? How can these diverse events be analysed, and how can socialists approach the issue of practical solidarity and aid? These questions are taken up in this report to the February 2006 of the International Committee of the FI.

I. The framework of the debate

First we will stress five points which serve as the framework for this report.

1. It was originally conceived as an element of the discussion on the world situation, and not as a point "in itself" on the agenda of this meeting. The international situation has been marked by the succession, within one year, of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and then the earthquake in Kashmir and Pakistan. The impact of these catastrophes is such that it has become a political fact which deserves to be treated as such. All the more so in that it poses questions of orientation linked to an activist area of intervention.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/kashmir.jpg>]

It is fairly unusual to introduce such a question in the framework of a discussion on the world situation. But it's a good innovation. In particular it allows us to reflect on the spot on the basis of effective actions. It also contributes to the integration of the "ecological" as a component of a reflection of a general character (and not as a chapter which is artificially "adjusted" to a traditional agenda).

2. I use here the term "natural disasters" without prejudging their origins (natural or human). That seems to me legitimate; these are indeed disasters which occur under the impact of natural elements (earthquakes, floods and so on.) and it is this which constitutes their specificity. In the same way, we can speak of health crises without prejudging their origins (which can also be 100% human: see mad cow disease).

On the origin of natural disasters, we can at least discuss three hypothetical cases:

- ▶ An origin which is 100% natural. This is generally the case with earthquakes. I can perfectly well conceive that the unleashing of a given earthquake can be precipitated by a human action (like a subterranean explosion?). However, neither the most vulgar nor the subtlest Marxist can show that globalised capitalism influences plate tectonics.
- ▶ An origin which is 100% human. This is for example the case with destructive floods (they can lead to thousands of deaths) brought about by the deforestation of mountainous slopes.
- ▶ A mixed origin - or an indirect human origin. It is here that I would be tempted to place Katrina according to the hypothesis under which the climatic disturbance brought about by greenhouse gases is already beginning to have effects on the frequency and violence of tropical hurricanes.

3. Is it possible to discuss various types of natural disaster together, whatever their origins? I think so, to a certain extent at least, because they raise many similar political problems. The tsunami, Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake are brought together here in an accidental fashion, because they happened recently and are topical. They operate on very different levels: the impact of an undersea earthquake on the surface of the oceans and coastal zones; the formation of tropical hurricanes; an earthquake in mountainous country. But all raise common socio-political problems and involve tasks which are to some extent common.

4. To this general theme of natural disasters we will add a specific point concerning climate in this discussion. As the British comrades have correctly stressed, we need to take into account the importance (properly historic) of the question and the actuality of the international campaigns undertaken in this area. Here it is necessary to integrate the scientific side of the question: the human impact on the biosphere. It's not my place to do that! That will be the subject of a separate contribution by a more competent comrade.

After having raised the similarities between all the types of natural disaster, we now touch on a significant difference, according to "origin". It can be interesting to explain the plate tectonics but that has only a limited impact on our tasks (where and how is the question of prevention posed?); there is no need to go into details because nothing can be changed here. On the other hand, the problem is to change the human impact on the dynamic of the climate. We cannot do this without reviewing the existing scientific knowledge in this area.

5. The current evolution of the climate is one of the main symptoms indicating the breadth of qualitative change which has taken place in recent decades in the dynamic of ecological crises. There have certainly been ecological crises in the past, but they remained local or regional. The novelty in the final third of the 20th century is that contemporary capitalism (post-1960s) has opened an ecological crisis of human origin with a global dynamic.

For some time now we have understood the importance and gravity of this turning point; but this judgement is today confirmed with the climatic crisis in formation.

If we speak of crisis, it is obviously from a human viewpoint. The biosphere is indifferent to its evolutions. That is not the case for us, for it is the conditions of existence of the human race which are worsening and are imperilled.

In the rest of this report, we will approach a certain number of problems which have been posed to us, passing from the more specific to the more general and starting from the events from the end of 2004 to the end of 2005.

II. Anti-capitalist agitation and concrete struggles

A. The iniquity and negligence of the dominant system laid bare

The tsunami of the end of 2004 generated shock waves in consciousness on a rare scale at the international level, for multiple reasons (media coverage, identification facilitated by the presence of numerous Western tourists and so on). The impact of hurricane Katrina has also been profound because this time the catastrophe happened in the most powerful country in the world... and the same iniquity, the same negligence was shown. As to the earthquake which struck Kashmir and Pakistan, it is a reminder of the extent to which solidarity for the victims can be forgotten.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/new_orleans_flood.jpg] Aftermath in New Orleans

The succession of these catastrophes has a great demonstrative power. The critique of actually existing capitalism (and in particular capitalism at a time of neoliberal globalisation) has become apparent to many with the strength of an obvious fact. Indeed, negligence was on display at all stages of the drama.

- ▶ Background: blind and destructive logic of profit. Because they work via natural elements, the disasters of which we are speaking here pose the ecological question sharply. The impact of the logic of profit appears at every level. In the detail, with the destruction of natural protections like the humid zones (marshes and so on) or the coastal vegetation (mangrove forests and so on). At a global scale with the greenhouse gases.
- ▶ Inequalities in prevention, bellicose priorities. Examples abound. Anti-tsunami warning systems were set up in the Pacific Ocean to protect the coasts of Japan and the USA but not in the Indian Ocean, funds intended for the

maintenance of the levees in New Orleans were diverted for Iraq war expenditure; in Pakistan the administration and the (omnipresent) army were not prepared to intervene during a (foreseeable) earthquake in Kashmir.

- ▶ Inequality in the face of emergency. In a general fashion, the official emergency services (national then international) were slow to arrive. Then, emergency aid was affected in a very unequal fashion, with striking phenomena of "invisibility" of the poor and of the most oppressed sectors of the population (dalit in India, Tamil in Sri Lanka, rural mountain dwellers in Pakistan, black people in the US and so on). The aid circuits have in most cases reflected the relations of domination (class, caste, gender), of political and religious clientelism, of corruption.
- ▶ Geostrategic dependency. International aid from states was modulated according to geostrategic interests which had very little to do with humanitarian needs. This is one of the reasons it takes a military form. That was particularly clear in the Indian Ocean with the sending (albeit late) of the French or US naval forces in a key sector (the oil route between Indian and Pacific oceans) of conflict zones (Aceh, Sri Lanka) while carrying out avowed propaganda operations ("rectifying" the USA's poor image among Muslims).
- ▶ Reconstruction. Disasters are often perceived by the wealthy as very good opportunities to be seized. This was for example the case during the financial crises of 1998: a social catastrophe in many Asian countries but the opportunity for the Western and Japanese multinationals to buy up the companies of the region for a song. It is again the case today. The tsunami cleansed the coasts, destroying the fishing villages, and Katrina cleansed the poorest neighbourhoods of New Orleans. For the official reconstruction policies, the poorest once again become "invisible". Priority is given (in the name of the "security" of course) to the tourist industry on the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to the better off people in Louisiana.

When we study what happened before, during and after the catastrophe in a given place, like Tamil Nadu, the lessons are revealing. We see concretely how all the relations of domination (world, local) turn the most oppressed and exploited into victims repeatedly. We see also how these relations of domination are exacerbated at a time of imperialist globalisation.

Natural disasters thus represent a major social experience. A complex experience also, in which the political, the humanitarian, the social, gender relations and the ecological are inextricably intertwined.

B. A field of action and the politics of aid

Beyond the force of demonstration on the iniquity of the imperialist system, natural disasters pose us numerous political questions. They form a major test for the popular organisations of the disaster-stricken regions and for international solidarity. Indeed, we cannot confine ourselves to anti-capitalist agitation alone. It is necessary to act. It is a question of responsibility, faced with the distress of the affected populations.

We approach here the question of the politics of aid. I will not attempt to deal with it in its global aspects. It is indeed a question of multiple facets because it includes very diverse types of intervention, with specific political problems on each occasion. The emergency aid associations, for example, only intervene punctually. In this area, one of the main political questions posed to them is that of independence in relation to governments, at the time moreover where armies intervene on the same terrain (and at a time of "humanitarian wars").

I do not seek to oppose a "good" terrain of aid to others. The intervention of emergency aid associations has its legitimacy. I would like to open a reflection on the terrain which is more specifically "ours", taking account of our (modest) means and of our commitment.

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Let us say in a formula that our privileged field of action - on which our responsibility is directly engaged - is that of direct solidarity "from people to people", assured by organisations "on the ground", progressive, political, associative and trade union.

There is here a political choice: to draw together and strengthen the links between revolutionary and popular organisations at local, national and international level. Such is not only the case for reasons of programme or of general orientation (our activist commitments). It is also the case for reasons of effectiveness. For all the experience of the past year confirms the effectiveness, which is specific and irreplaceable, of this field of action. I would like to stress the above, because it goes against "common sense" for which the mega-interventions of the states or the big humanitarian organisations are necessarily more effective.

This specific effectiveness also manifests itself at each stage:-

- ▶ An alternative to the logic of profit. We have noted in the preceding point the destructive character of the logic of profit at work via the domination of the capitalist mode de production. Let's mention here for the sake of memory (we will come back to the question of the climate) the fact that the popular, progressive organisations fight for another overall logic which starts from social needs and the ecological situation.

They attack the root of the problem and not merely its consequences. It is essential for the full development of egalitarian policies of prevention in the area of natural disasters. But it is also this which explains practical effectiveness on the ground.

- ▶ Effectiveness in emergencies. In many cases, initial aid has been provided by popular organisations coming from neighbouring villages or regions. It is particularly clear in the case of the tsunami where only a coastal strip was devastated: the local popular organisations were the first to react. Beyond the tourist and urban zones, notably, official aid took several days to arrive - and still longer in the case of international aid.

The case of Kashmir is interesting. The aid organised by the Labour Relief Campaign came from quite far away (Lahore notably). A certain time was needed for the organisation and transportation of the aid. Nonetheless, it was the first in position in the zone chosen for its action; the first also to begin to build around a hundred durable rustic houses instead of being content to erect tents which were incapable of offering shelter during the mountain winter.

- ▶ Solidarity from "poor to poor". Thus emergency aid provided by the popular organisations represents a solidarity from "poor to poor", often implemented under the leadership of women. It ensures a social priority in favour of the more needy, contrary to the action of the administrations.
- ▶ Thrifty solidarity. Solidarity provided by the popular organisations is not costly, because it is activist-based and is based on local resources.
- ▶ Knowledge of the social terrain. Organisations from the neighbouring area have an intimate knowledge of the local social realities which all aid policies should take into account. We give some examples to illustrate this. The psychological shock to the fishing communities struck by the tsunami has been very deep. Death and destruction came from the nourishing sea, without any warning. All was normal and five minutes later, all was destroyed. To be effective, it is necessary to understand this very specific trauma. It is also necessary in Tamil Nadu to be familiar with caste relations - between fishers and dalits (the "Untouchables") notably - and inter-religious relations.

A last example: the European Union sent fishing boats to Sri Lanka which were too big. Unusable. The boats built

locally respond on the other hand to local needs.

Any aid policy should fully take into account the specific conditions proper not only to the type of natural disaster but also to the region affected.

- ▶ Long term presence - what reconstruction? The popular organisations can provide a presence in the long term and consciously make the link between emergency policies and reconstruction policies. Better, they can do it through a socially solidarity-based approach.

To illustrate what I want to say here, I take an example drawn from Tamil Nadu: it is not only about overcoming caste antagonisms (including between poor: fishers and dalits) and avoiding the eviction of the coastal villages to the benefit of the tourist industry. Reconstruction policies can (should) also allow the initiation of processes of social transformation. Have the (hired) boats been destroyed by the tsunami? In the example that I evoke, the choice has been made of new boats which have been built thanks to international aid and are henceforth owned in cooperative form by the women of the village. Or a progressive modification of the relations of ownership and gender.

- ▶ A socially solidarity-based approach. The organisations of which we speak here are not popular only from the fact of their implantation. From Tamil Nadu to Kashmir, numerous "sectarian" organisations (generally religious, xenophobic and so on) with a very real social implantation have rapidly involved themselves in aid, but with an approach which is not solidarity-based: playing their caste against the others as a politician favours their clientele; or building their church as a multinational captures market shares.

Popular takes on here a political meaning: socially solidarity-based. It amounts obviously, but not only, to defending the most exploited and oppressed faced with the power of money, states and armies. It is also about affirming an alternative to the "casteist", racist, xenophobic and fundamentalist movements. It is a daily struggle in a good number of regions affected by the tsunami and in Pakistan/Kashmir. The forms are different according to the cases. In India violence is inter-caste (against dalits above all) and inter-religious (against Muslims and Christians above all). In Pakistan, this type of violence opposes Muslim sects against each other.

If the forms of intolerance vary, the basic problem remains. Indeed, an aid policy faced with a natural catastrophe is an opportunity par excellence to affirm a solidarity-based project in the strong sense of the term. The notion of "people to people" solidarity is the point of departure, the angle of approach which allows us to broach this question.

- ▶ An approach which is challenging and fundamental Of course, the "people to people" or "poor to poor" solidarity cannot do everything. It cannot provide the helicopters necessary for aid in the high mountains of Kashmir! But it is effective, and not simply "politically correct".

Let us say, to conclude this point, that in the area of aid as others, we need to act jointly on two levels. A "demand-based" level which faces states with their responsibilities (note here that it was under the pressure of public opinion, after the tsunami, that the western governments had to increase their financial commitments, which were at the beginning rightly ridiculed). A more fundamental level: to lay out our own policy on this terrain - and then to think it.

We still lack experience and reflection on this question. Or at least, the experiences gone through in various countries have not been collectivised at the international level. Let's look then at a certain number of initiatives which were taken at the end of 2004 and in 2005.

C. Elements of reflection around three types of initiative

Concretely, the question of aid is posed in very different terms according to the case, from the end of 2004 to today. The tsunami generated an immense spontaneous sentiment of solidarity (a groundswell!) and a multiplication of initiatives. That was not at all the case with the earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir; this time, solidarity initiatives were taken up in a voluntarist fashion. Finally, Katrina represented a real political shock (a disaster of this type in the USA) but to my knowledge, has not led to public international campaigns: is it necessary to send aid to the richest country in the world?

Faced with the torrent of initiatives launched following the tsunami, we had to respond to the question: to whom should aid be addressed? In France, we first echoed the appeals launched by the humanitarian organisations or emergency aid bodies independent of the states (Secours populaire, Médecins sans frontières and so on), then we concentrated on campaigns of two types.

1. Aid to "sister organisations". It amounted in the event to the aid brought to the NSSP of Sri Lanka. But it more generally it amounts to support addressed in emergency to the "sister organisations" of the affected zones: from party to party, union to union and so on. This aid is legitimate, necessary. It can be very important for the organisation which receives it, strengthening its ability to act in times of emergency. But it usually only mobilises the militants and sympathisers of the movements concerned (for example, the sections of the Fourth International or the partners of Frères des Hommes).

This type of aid has obvious limits. It addresses itself to narrow milieus and networks, without responding to the question "What is to be done?" in broader milieus. It does not dynamise the social movement.

2. Support for collective campaigns initiated by the social movements. We have moreover actively supported collective campaigns originating from the movement for global justice. In this case appeals launched by Via Campesina and relayed by a good number of the organisations which participate in the process of the social forum. Via Campesina had organisations in several of the countries affected (Sri Lanka, Indonesia...).

In this framework, "people to people" aid (from social movement to social movement, but collectively) takes form. The financial campaign can gain in breadth. The multiple links of solidarity which are drawn up in the framework of the movement for global justice are strengthened.

The conditions necessary to this type of campaign are not always met. It is necessary that the political impact of the catastrophe is sufficient and that at least a "recognised" organisation inside the movement (trade union, global justice movement and so on.) can offer national or local relays.

3. Building a solidarity initiative. In the case of Pakistan/Kashmir, things present themselves very differently: these conditions were not met. No collective initiative came from the social movement, as had been the case for the tsunami. On the one hand, there was no spontaneous mobilisation of consciousness (and thus no political pressure to act - neither on the governments nor on the movements!). On the other hand, neither Via Campesina nor the French trade unions had any sister organisations in the areas directly concerned (the mountains of Kashmir).

In a general fashion, Franco-Pakistani links of solidarity are moreover tenuous, confined primarily to some NGOs. Financial appeals were also launched after the earthquake, but they primarily illustrated the first hypothesis mentioned here (the "sister organisations"): western NGOs collecting funds for their Pakistani partners; political currents doing the same. But at the level of "broad" solidarity, compared to the post-tsunami period, it was a situation of a flat electro-encephalogram whereas the situation of the peoples affected was really dramatic! In this context, Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF) took a proactive initiative which has yielded results which, while modest, are nonetheless more than anticipated. The experience is, it seems to me, interesting.

ESSF is a small association which contributes notably to strengthening the European-Asian solidarity inside the global justice movement. It responded to the appeal launched in Pakistan by the Labour Education Foundation (LEF), which initiated the Labour Relief Campaign (LRC). This choice was natural enough, given the pre-existing links with the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), itself a participant in the LRC. The choice was also to support the popular Pakistani organisations "on the ground" (rather than the NGOs), independent of the military regime and the fundamentalist movements, working in a socially solidarity-based perspective - namely inter-community, secular (in this case, referring to the values of the workers' movement). The LRC includes a trade union component and a women's network, which should help to broaden the financial campaign.

The campaign was led with limited means (articles in the militant press, the Internet site of the ESSF, messages on e-mail lists...). The appeal was relayed (jointly with two others) by a trade union (on the Internet de Sud site). An important point: information coming directly from Pakistan (transportation of aid lorries, construction of houses and so on) helped build the campaign in Europe. 16, 500 euros were sent to the Labour Relief Campaign; in addition to France, donations came from Catalonia, Germany, Switzerland, Greece and Denmark.

It was the first time that the ESSF took such an initiative directly. The association benefited from its previous involvement in Euro-Asiatic solidarity and a very "natural" partnership with the Labour Relief Campaign. There again, such conditions are not always met. But this initiative, taken up "on the spot" and on a small scale, allows us to reflect on the specific role of associations like ESSF in the development of an aid policy.

Concrete political problems

In intervening on the terrain of aid, we are obviously faced with political problems. We have already mentioned a whole series of them, at a general level: guaranteeing the independence of the campaigns in relation to states, criteria of choice of partners, the very conception of solidarity. Many other problems emerge when we find ourselves faced with concrete situations. The impact of a natural disaster in a civil war zone can, for example, be very different: unblocking of peace negotiations in Aceh, in the Indonesian archipelago, but not in Sri Lanka.

I will content myself here to give another example. Kashmir cruelly lacked helicopters for emergency aid in high mountains whereas there was a plethora in neighbouring Afghanistan. We denounced - rightly - the passivity of the western powers. At the same time - and also rightly - we rejected the intervention under humanitarian guise of NATO armies in Kashmir (as well as in Sri Lanka or in Indonesia). How do we go beyond this paradox?

Having learnt that the UN emergency intervention programme was to hire (very expensively) the helicopters necessary to their action (and that they lacked funds), I wrote that the armies should lend their machines for free so that they could be used in the framework of a civilian intervention.

Was this the correct response? In any case, it remained confidential, for a limited audience. Indeed, we should be capable of discussing political problems which are posed to us "on the spot", to find the right responses and genuinely campaign.

There are comrades from New Orleans, Sri Lanka and Pakistan here who could say much more on the concrete experience they have lived through.

D. By way of a conclusion on aid

Situations of disaster are common in the world, even if we have only evoked three here. For the organisations of the most affected regions, it is a constant preoccupation. The same should be true for international solidarity.

It is obviously impossible for us to respond to every appeal. But it is necessary, more than in the past, to consider the terrain of aid as a field of intervention, as a durable component of an internationalist politics.

It is all the more true if we fear that big natural disasters will be more rather than less frequent in the future. That's a useful basis to move towards the question of climate.

III. The question of climate change: the telescoping of transitional demands?

In the fight against climate change, the same demand that is raised in relation to the aid question is relevant. Combining anti-capitalist agitation faced with the inability of governments to take necessary measures and campaigns on concrete objectives. But this dual demand is posed here in fairly different terms.

Faced with the danger of tsunami and earthquakes, we can make a list of simple, precise measures: placing tsunami detectors in the Indian Ocean, improving the international alert system, redeveloping natural protections like coastal vegetation (mangrove, marsh and so on), ensure a public health service, build according to anti-seismic standards and so on.

These measures have nothing "revolutionary" in themselves. The scandal, is that they have not been implemented whereas many of them are both effective and elementary. Of course, the underlying, more profound questions are posed and will be posed: the weight of social inequality or of gender, the logic of capitalist profit which is opposed to the deployment of public policies of prevention and so on. But the fight can begin by orienting around simple demands.

The difference, so far as climate change is concerned, is that to be minimally effective, the measures immediately affect the organisation of production. They cannot content themselves with being "elementary".

For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions significantly implies a reorganisation of the energy sector, but also that of transport - and then that of world trade - and then that of agriculture (more "peasant" and less industrial) - and then that of urban policy and of land development. It does not amount to an artificial or "maximalist" linking.

We cannot radically change energy consumption in the sense demanded without also tackling the question of transport (of commodities, of persons between housing and workplace), then, to the localisation of production and modes of consumption (with the accompanying cultural revolution). The emergency measures (I stress: emergency) imply a logic which breaks with that of capitalism. It is one of the specificities of the climate question which is linked to its global character (as much in the origin as in the consequences).

Given the gravity of the climate crisis (for the human race), the breadth and nature of the problem posed, it is as if the "maximum programme" became the "minimum programme", telescoping the transitional dynamic which normally allows the making of a link between the two in struggle.

The break with capitalism appears completely logically as the "elementary" response to the question posed. The contradiction to which we are confronted, is that the socialist perspective does not always appear as a palpable alternative. There is then a specific tension between the concrete demands (it is vital to act now) and the credibility of real solutions.

That complicates certain debates. The Kyoto protocol, for example, is both very insufficient and perverse (commodity approach). But the fact of not signing it, on the part particularly of the US, still deserves to be denounced.

One can nonetheless begin to get out of this contradiction. Indeed, there is a beginning of a meeting between the global justice movement and the ecological tradition which is taking place in particular on the field of "climate" mobilisation (there are other, linked for example to the echo of the struggles of indigenous peoples).

It is only a beginning and that remains very unequally true according to the country. But at least, this allows action. There is here a major responsibility: accelerate and amplify this meeting in putting more resources into the "climate" campaigns (see the contribution of the British comrades).

One obviously meets limits. "Numerical" (the forces available). But also political. The perception of the problem varies and there are few places of collectivisation of experiences and reflection. Indeed, the climate crisis obliges us to integrate the ecological question more completely than in the past, whatever the progress already made in this area. Indeed, that is not self-evident. It is the final point of my introduction.

IV. Ecology, militant culture and political programme

We cannot integrate the ecological question without taking fully into account nature - which is not simple at all and which, moreover, is generally foreign enough to the militant culture of the workers' movement and the anti-capitalist organisations.

Certainly, there is no longer (or nearly) any "virgin" nature. Nature has a history interlinked with human history, and this has been true for a very long time (since the Neolithic revolution?). We are today confronted with the impact of human activities on the biosphere. We follow closely the rate of production of carbon dioxide - which has the advantage of being measurable.

But it is not only about the greenhouse effect gases. Before being modified by social production, the biosphere is made up of ecosystems and is their product. We cannot define scientifically the ideal composition (for the human race) of the biosphere and reproduce it artificially! We can on the contrary note (it's a good reference point) that the previous state of things has been very favourable to us and that one of the means of preserving it is to preserve the ecosystems which correspond to it. The transformation of productive (and consumer) logic should not only allow the reduction of the production of carbon dioxide, it is necessary to modify radically the relationship between nature and human society.

It is not about abstractly opposing human activities and natural spaces. Many rich milieus depend on a specific social production (hay field, enclosure and so on). All the same, many natural milieus serve better human needs than costly artificial solutions (see the multiple roles of humid zones, from protection against floods to the purification of polluted waters passing by the maintenance of biodiversity). But capitalism has its reasons that socio-ecological reason ignores: it imposes in the name of the progress productive modes which are irrational as much from the social as the ecological point of view... but which are very rational from the point of view of the search for profit and power.

The global ecological crisis (from the human point of view) opened by the development of capitalism after the second world war does not only concern the climate, but the whole of society/nature relations. The intervention on the question of climate change can help to integrate more intimately to our programme this dimension. It obliges us notably to study (without pretension) natural mechanisms on which to base our political action, which is very much too rarely the case. But we will encounter several difficulties.

First type of difficulty: it is not easy to popularise and politically assimilate scientific knowledge. Additional difficulty:

we also come up against, which simplifies nothing, the limits of this knowledge in relation to very complex systems: to what point do climatologists and oceanologists know the biosphere, the oceans and the dynamic of the climate?

Second type of difficulty: we come up against "common sense" on questions where the critical tradition is much less anchored in our militant milieu than on the directly social terrain. It seemed, for example, that with technical progress it was possible to free ourselves quasi-totally of natural constraints (see the extreme model of off ground agriculture). The boomerang effect of climate change shows that the process is much more contradictory.

Additional difficulty: for Marxists, the society/nature relationship is not understood without the mediation of social relations inside societies: one cannot qualitatively change the society/nature relationship without modifying social relations. Marxists are as it happens right, even if many non-socialist ecologists prefer to ignore it. But it is not necessary to conclude that it suffices to tackle the question of social relations, without analysing more specifically the human impact on nature and the natural mechanisms.

Let us pose the question: what has the new sharpness of the ecological question changed about our approach? If the response is "nothing" (since everything comes back to the social), there is a problem! Indeed, one still senses much reticence in integrating completely the ecological question (and then the nature: knowledge of ecosystems, climatic mechanisms and so on).

Third type of difficulty: the coherence and articulation of the proposals. We need to take account of the entire ecological question. For example, we struggle jointly for the reduction of greenhouse emissions (and against the dictatorship of the oil lobby) and against nuclear energy (and the dictatorship of the atomic lobby). We are for policies of reforestation, but not any ones; the wood industry favours modes of reforestation (according to criteria of profitability) which have disastrous socio-ecological effects. Rendering coherency to the programme of action that we present in the various areas demands much attention.

That is to say that it is necessary to retake the collective reflection on technological choices (centrality of solar power and so on), who had been engaged during the 1970s but that has not been pursued in the 1980s. To oppose an alternative "modernisation" to that which the multinationals impose on us.

All this is very fragmentary and seeks only to reintroduce a debate. It is necessary to give us the means of collectivising experiences, knowledge and reflection (proposal for seminar, use of Internet sites and so on). But there is no need to await the response to everything to pursue activism and to participate in unitary campaigns. With the notable objective of making the link between different areas: structure of classes and mode of production, cultures and militant traditions, nature, technologies and so on.

After the debate: return on seven questions

I will come back here only on some elements of the discussion.

1. Humanism and nature. I have been asked to be more precise on my positions, after my references to nature. I repeat: the notion of ecological crisis is a human notion. The biosphere is indifferent to the power and frequency of hurricanes, to the arrival of an ice age or a torrid age, to biodiversity. Not us.

I have always found that a humanism respectful of life was richer than a humanism indifferent to the animal and vegetable kingdom. I think that there is no need of utilitarian "justification" to protect threatened species. But, if that I

does not convince, let us stress that in a time of global ecological crisis, this preference is no longer only a "political-cultural" choice, but a condition of effectiveness.

Like all the species I imagine (but to a higher degree of tension), humanity undertakes a dual relationship of opposition and belonging with nature. But beware: the relationship of opposition works inside the relationship of belonging. That's very much what the climatic crisis reminds us of!

2. Thinking aid policies. The approach introduced here should be enlarged. We have only started with the response to natural disasters. We find similar questions in the emergency aid to populations displaced by military combat, our comrades from Mindanao can talk about it! And it would be interesting to return to the history (because there is a history) of "material" solidarity (financial, medical aid and so on) in the internationalist tradition. The subject is vast.

3. How far does the dynamic of the climate crisis go? The biosphere is a very complex system in dynamic equilibrium. Some quantitative modifications can lead to the "sectoral" (change of route followed by marine currents and so on) or global ruptures of equilibrium. It is impossible to predict where the points of rupture are situated. A global rupture of equilibrium should open a long chaotic period before leading to a new dynamic equilibrium, which is also unpredictable. That is to state the breadth of the problem posed!

4. Is it possible to transform rapidly an entire sector of production? It is possible. A good example was provided in France by the transformation of electric production with the nuclear choice. In a decade, electricity of nuclear origin went from 0% to 80% of production. Of course, on this occasion, there was a massive concerted action by the state (including armies: link between civilian and military nuclear choices) and of the private sector in the framework of an active planning (state capitalism). This concerted effort took place for political reasons (France as nuclear power) which does not reduce itself to the search for profit (the technological choices of the bourgeois states and the big capitalist firms respond also to the logic of power).

The problem, today, is not essentially "technical". It is political and social. Some very powerful interests are opposed to the necessary transformation of the sectors of energy, transport, trade and so on.

5. Again a word on the basic approach. I evoked in my introduction to the debate the necessity of ensuring the coherence of ecological demands (so that the measures advocated, for example, to reduce the production carbon dioxide, do not endanger biodiversity). It is necessary obviously also to ensure the coherence of social and environmental approaches.

The environmental measures that we advocate should not increase social inequalities (or international inequalities). That would be unjust; and there is enough injustice in the world without adding to it! That would also be ineffective. Without proper support, the battle for ecological reforms (which are opposed to the logic of capital) will not be won. It is necessary to create a social relationship of forces, which demands an egalitarian approach.

It is by taking account of this that we can approach the question of the "right price" of energy or of "ecological" taxes. Access to energy is a fundamental right for which we fight. One can undermine this combat by axising the ecological battle on a massive rise in energy prices in the name of true costs and the restructuring of consumption (of which the non-rich will bear the cost). In the same way, an environmental tax should be effective ET to be implemented in a socially egalitarian fashion to be progressive: this is not very frequently the case.

The reciprocal is true: one can no longer, in the name of social emergency, advance measures which would have as their consequence the worsening of the ecological crisis. The environmental emergency is not indeed least.

To say otherwise: one cannot have two parallel programmes, which ignore each other: the first social and the

second environmental (as is often the case among the Green parties). One of the main demands to which we are faced is to link them to each other.

6. Horizon and transition.

A politics of energy revolution should have a horizon (decentralisation, adaptability, importance of solar power, priority to renewable and efficiency and so on), but also to deal with the transition between the current system and this horizon. We must work on transitional technologies, which can possibly include fossil fuels ("clean" techniques of coal treatment?). We stress again that nuclear power is not an acceptable transitional technology: it opposes the logic of reform (it is the very example of a source of energy demanding a hyper-centralisation and a maximal production which can not be put under democratic control), it cannot resolve the question of the greenhouse effect, it leads to growing risks with its dissemination and leaves as its heritage radioactive waste for human eternity.

7. Collective work. Let us repeat and underline it: we cannot render coherent the approach in the various environmental areas, as well as the ecological and social approaches, without collective work. A collective work which is, at the same, indispensable in order to integrate to a critical political thought the question of technological choices (what modernisation?) and of ecosystems (nature). This collective work is the urgency of the hour.