



Ecology

Ecosocialists debate James Hansen's climate change exit strategy

25 March 2018, by **Ian Angus, John Bellamy Foster**

Five years ago, in "James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy," John Bellamy Foster argued that proposals advanced by the noted climate scientist represented a "crucial first step," in the fight to stop climate change, but that they were insufficient and "not by any means the last step." [1]

Foster's article was the subject of several discussions in *Climate & Capitalism*, with some writers arguing that we should give more support to the "fee and dividend" part of Hansen's program, and others absolutely rejecting it.

In March of this year [2017], the Swiss socialist journal *A l'encontre La Brèche* published a two-part article by our good friend and C&C contributor Daniel Tanuro, titled "La taxe-dividende sur le CO2: menaces sur la droite, piège pour la gauche" (Tax-dividend on CO2: a threat from the right, a trap for the left), which strongly criticizes Foster and me for supporting Hansen's approach. [2]

Although I disagreed with his arguments, I felt that his article was as an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of ecosocialist strategy, so I offered to publish a translation in *Climate & Capitalism*, but arrangements had already been made to publish it on the socialist

website *Jacobin*. It was posted there under the title "The Right's Green Awakening." [3]

The editors of *Jacobin* graciously agreed to publish a reply by Foster and me. It is reposted below.

The steps to ecosocialism

Any ecosocialist movement must have a strategy for organizing in the here and now.

We were pleased to learn that Daniel Tanuro was writing an article on carbon pricing schemes. His book *Green Capitalism: Why it Can't Work* makes important contributions to ecosocialist thought, and he has an impressive record of personal involvement in many radical environmental campaigns in Europe. We looked forward to the clear explanation and strong critique of market-based approaches to climate change that we know he could write.

Unfortunately, "The Right's Green Awakening" does not live up to the generally high standard set by his book. Instead of addressing the carbon-pricing plans that have surfaced in capitalist politics, Tanuro focuses his critique on proposals

developed by leading climate scientist James Hansen and on the critical support that we gave his proposal in *Monthly Review* and *Climate & Capitalism*. [4]

Tanuro equates our position "and Hansen's rather different one" with a proposal advanced by some right-wing American politicians, arguing that we support "a populist variant . . . [of] neoliberal doctrine." Naturally, we disagree.

We are not saying that our views are above criticism. Open debate is an essential part of building a global ecosocialist movement, and we welcome thoughtful responses to anything we have written. However, since Tanuro's article seriously misrepresents both Hansen's plan and our approach to it, we need to correct his misunderstandings before a proper discussion can begin.

Hansen's Proposals

What we have called James Hansen's "Climate Change Exit Strategy" includes a fee-and-dividend plan, under which fossil-fuel companies would pay a periodically increasing carbon fee at the well head, mine shaft, or point of entry. All the revenue

from these payments would be distributed as dividends to the population on a per capita basis.

Unlike carbon trading plans and taxes on consumer purchases, Hansen's proposed fee would be simple to collect and hard to evade. Hansen estimates that 60 percent of American citizens would receive more in dividends than they would have to pay in price increases.

Unlike mainstream economists who promise magical results from carbon pricing alone, Hansen realizes that "by itself, a carbon fee cannot solve the energy problem and allow rapid coal phase-out," so his program goes further than that. [5]

He includes an outright ban on tar sands oil, shale oil and gas, and methane hydrates as well as the closure of all coal-fired plants that cannot capture their CO2 emissions "which amounts to every one in operation today.

Hansen also calls for the elimination of all subsidies to fossil-fuel companies, for a global transition to sustainable farming and forestry practices, for rapid reduction of methane, ozone, and black carbon emissions, for substantial aid to developing countries for clean energy development and implementation, and for investment in what he hopes will be safe, fourth-generation nuclear technologies.

These measures, taken together, represent a comprehensive climate-change exit strategy.

A Conservative Trojan Horse

The newly formed Climate Leadership Council (CLC) published "[The Conservative Case for Climate Dividends]" in February 2017. [6] Six former Republican party leaders and the former chairman of Walmart all signed it, fearing that crude anti-environmental policies will hurt the Republicans at the polls, leading "younger voters[,] who hold the key to the future political fortune of either party," to support advocates of

"growth-inhibiting command-and-control regulations."

To avoid that, they propose a plan "that showcases the full power of enduring conservative convictions." Their main proposal "a gradually increasing tax on carbon dioxide emissions distributed to all American citizens" does resemble Hansen's fee-and-dividend plan, but, in sharp contrast to his approach, they insist that it be tied to a "significant regulatory rollback." No ban on unconventional fuels, no shut down of coal-fired plants, and no investment in conservation or clean energy. "Much of the EPA's regulatory authority over carbon dioxide emissions would be phased out, including an outright repeal of the Clean Power Plan," they write, and citizens would not be allowed to sue emitters for damages.

What's more, fee increases will automatically end after five years unless a "Blue Ribbon Panel" decides otherwise. They don't specify the panel's composition, but we won't be surprised when fossil fuel interests play a big role.

In short, the CLC's caricature of a fee-and-dividend plan doesn't aim to prevent climate change. It is a Trojan horse for trashing every practical measure that might contribute to that goal.

In practice, of course, actual Republican leaders have decided to abolish regulatory protections without bothering to set a carbon price or to promise voters a dividend, so Tanuro's concern that the CLC plan "could shape public consensus in a real way" seems misplaced.

Ecosocialists and Hansen's Program

This conservative scam is not the same as Hansen's plan, and it bears no resemblance to the revolutionary ecosocialist program that we have defended for years.

Nevertheless, Tanuro tendentiously links Hansen's views to the conservatives "describing the CLC plan as "an idea first proposed by

prominent climatologist James Hansen" and asserting that "Hansen originally formulated the plan." He refers to "Hansen's and the CLC's proposals" as if they were identical. Then, much to our surprise, he claims that John Bellamy Foster "strongly supported the dividend tax," as do "his followers, who include Ian Angus." He devotes the second half of his article to criticizing us for that.

Tanuro may not have intended to identify our views with those of the reactionary CLC, but that's certainly the impression his article creates.

Although both of us have written multiple articles about Hansen's approach to climate change, Tanuro's criticism is based on only one example, Foster's "James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy," published five years ago. [7] That article, the first in any socialist publication to discuss the nature and significance of Hansen's proposals, has two major sections: "Hansen's Exit Strategy," an objective account of the program, and "Capitalism's Ecological Footprint: Beyond Hansen's Exit Strategy," an ecosocialist critique that argues for "a much larger social transformation" than what Hansen imagines. (We think the criticisms of Hansen that Foster makes in this second section are actually much sharper and more complete than Tanuro's.)

In a shorter concluding section, Foster argues that Hansen's approach, despite its limitations, represents an important step forward for the movement to stop capitalist ecocide.

Throughout the article, Foster uses the term "exit strategy" to refer to Hansen's entire program, including his focus on shutting down pipelines, coal-fired plants, and unconventional fuel operations. Fee-and-dividend makes up only one part of the program, and, as Foster states clearly, it cannot stand alone: "all exclusively market-based strategies tend to backfire, since they rely principally on economic incentives." Hansen's fee-and-dividend plan, Foster writes, "is only a single wedge in what must be a much more comprehensive climate-change exit strategy."

Despite this, Tanuro repeatedly treats Foster's positive comments about the entire strategy as enthusiasm for the fee-and-dividend component. He says, for example, that we "argue that the dividend tax is the only feasible approach in the current context." In context, Foster's words clearly say that is Hansen's view, not ours: "This has led him to promote fee and dividend as the only feasible approach for getting carbon emissions down rapidly" (emphasis added).

Indeed, Tanuro repeatedly confuses Foster's presentation of Hansen's views with Foster's own opinion of those views. For example, Foster praises Hansen, who is not a socialist, for making a "calculated attempt to push through the maximum plan that the regime of capital could conceivably accept." That comment clearly refers to Hansen's intentions with the entire exit strategy, but in Tanuro's hands, it becomes, "They argue that the dividend tax is . . . the maximum that the capital regime could reasonably accept," as Foster puts it."

Similarly, Tanuro objects to Foster's description of Hansen's program as a "first step," because "the solution can only come . . . from the convergence of the concrete struggles of the exploited and the oppressed," implying that Foster ignores such struggles. He fails to note that immediately after mentioning this first step, Foster cautions:

A real solution demands a radical alteration in social priorities — the kind of revolutionary transformation that could occur at unimagined speed if the population were once to reach its own social-environmental tipping point.

Too often, Tanuro takes Foster's words out of context, changing their meaning. He writes: "Foster argues that Hansen's [fee and dividend] proposal is — objectively revolutionary." Here is Foster's entire sentence:

What is objectively revolutionary in Hansen's proposal is its root in a shared sense of emergency and crisis that can be readily communicated at the center of the system in the

monopoly-finance capital economies themselves.

Neither of us has ever suggested that a stand-alone fee-and-dividend plan is revolutionary. As Angus has written:

[F]ee and dividend can be part of a radical action program against climate change, but isn't sufficient by itself, and isn't suitable for building the mass movements that socialists know are needed.

Correcting all of the misquotes and misrepresentations in this article would take much more time and space, but we think the point has been made. Daniel Tanuro is criticizing us — and Hansen — for views we do not hold.

The Exit Strategy's Importance

Stripped to essentials, Tanuro's article makes two important points. First, "[t]he market can't be the solution . . . We have to confront the dynamics of accumulation, which the fee-and-dividend simply cannot do." And, second, we need "a social strategy that allies with the exploited and the oppressed to develop an ecosocialist alternative."

We agree entirely. That's exactly what Foster argues in the very article Tanuro criticizes.

The Hansen exit strategy for all of its strengths is itself insufficient. Its weakness is that it does not go far enough in addressing the social-systemic contradictions generated by the power structure of today's monopoly-finance capital. What is needed under present circumstances is an acceleration of history involving a reconstitution of society. The kinds of changes to be considered in the context of a planetary emergency cannot be confined within the narrow channels that the ruling class and its political power elite will accept. Rather, an effective climate-change exit strategy must rely on the much larger social transformation that can only be unleashed by means of mass-democratic mobilization.

Ecosocialists need not debate if

market solutions can do the job (they can't) or if we need to build a mass movement that can stop capitalist ecocide (of course we do). The real issue is: how do we get from here to there? How can ecosocialists, a relatively small political current, contribute to building the broad and united movement we agree is needed?

Tanuro's article doesn't address the *practical context* within which Hansen's climate change exit strategy developed. Conservative and liberal organizations that work closely with fossil fuel companies have long dominated the American green movement. As Naomi Klein shows in *This Changes Everything*, the largest green groups have "entangled their fates with the corporations at the heart of the climate crisis . . . [A]lmost no one's hands are clean." We can make little progress against climate change as long as such forces have organizational and political control.

That's why ecosocialists should support groups and campaigns like 350.org, Idle No More, and NoDAPL. While few of these "new climate warriors," as Klein calls them, are explicitly anticapitalist, they nevertheless put their bodies on the line to stop capital's most destructive projects. [8]

James Hansen played a critical role in motivating and building the new radical climate movement. He isn't just any climate scientist or just any activist. Since he first testified before a congressional committee in 1979, he has been recognized as the world's leading climatologist and a central actor in the new climate movement.

He has been arrested in an attempt to block coal-fired plants and in a protest over the Keystone XL pipeline designed to bring Alberta tar sands oil to the Gulf of Mexico. His activism, and willingness to be arrested in relation to these issues, shows what he considers to be essential.

A climate change exit strategy initiated by ecosocialists would undoubtedly have been stronger and more radical than Hansen's, but it would not have had the same significance or scientific credibility. When a figure of his prominence

draws radical conclusions from the failure of governments and corporations to act, the Left needs to pay attention.

Foster wrote his 2013 article for exactly that reason: to alert ecosocialists and others on the left to an important shift in green politics, a sea change that offers new possibilities for united action against capitalist ecocide. We write such articles because we agree with Marx: "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs."

We disagree with aspects of Hansen's program. We're uneasy about his support for nuclear energy, and we think he overemphasizes the fee-and-dividend part of his program. But we can never build a broad movement if we insist on unanimity. Unless you believe that putting a price on carbon must be absolutely opposed on principle "and that's not Tanuro's view, since he favors a tax on aircraft fuel "there is no reason to reject

Hansen's exit strategy out of hand.

We aren't debating whether fee-and-dividend offers a complete solution, but whether a program that includes it, along with campaigns to shut down coal plants, fracking, and tar sands mining, can contribute to a mass climate change movement.

As we build that movement, we will find ourselves working alongside people who think that "putting a price on carbon" represents the best solution. (If we don't find ourselves working with them, we haven't reached out far enough!) Should ecosocialists simply push them away? Or should we push them left, arguing, "If such a program is introduced, it must directly target fossil fuel corporations, while protecting the living standards of working people and the poor," as Hansen's proposal aims to do?

We need a program for action against

climate change that can win support from a broad range of current and potential activists. Hansen's program may not be perfect, but we do not know of a better one proposed by an environmentalist with his influence.

The fee-and-dividend plan doesn't conflict with building a mass movement, unless we present it as the sole solution. As part of a broad exit strategy along the lines Hansen proposes, it offers a principled basis for developing a broad anti-climate change movement and advances a systemic challenge to capitalism.

We agree with Daniel Tanuro that the market is not the answer: *ecosocialism is the answer*. Despite any disagreements we may have, we look forward to working with him on that vitally important project.

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The right's green awakening

22 March 2018, by **Daniel Tanuro**

There was a fly in the ointment, however, which French president François Hollande immediately pointed out: the parties had not agreed to introduce a carbon price, an element that had been at the center of capitalist climate strategy leading up to the summit. Six months before COP21, Hollande had said:

If we really want to send signals to the markets so that companies can make their decisions based on an economic optimum, which can be an ecological optimum, the question of the price of carbon is necessarily posed because it is the most tangible sign that can be addressed to all economic actors.

Hollande's statement reveals how capital continues, even more than before, to shape the agreements coming out of the COP summits. The dominant role of capital is made even

clearer by a new carbon tax-and-dividend scheme put out by neoliberal think-tanks and championed by a group of US Republicans.

But despite its populist potential and liberal pedigree, the proposal will not solve our ecological crisis. For that, we need to build a strong alliance from below that will develop alternatives freed from the profit-driven logic that produced the climate crisis in the first place.

Capital's Will

COP21's organizers did everything they could to give the impression that the heads of state and governments were writing history, but they had already spent a long time negotiating the details with multinational corporations. At the Lima COP

meeting the year before politicians and corporate heads established the framework for the Paris Accord through "high-level strategic dialogue."

Corporations insist on a central role in climate negotiations. Convinced that they will eventually have to internalize the costs of global warming, most large transnational corporations want a firm political decision on the carbon price as soon as possible so that they can plan their investments. They also demand a global carbon price to make sure all competitors pay more or less the same. (Pending political decisions, many multinationals are already practicing an internal carbon price, as recommended by the [Financial Stability Board](#)).

The manifestos, open letters, and various reports that capitalist think

tanks and corporate groups published in the months preceding COP21 clearly demonstrate this.

For example, the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, an influential think tank cochaired by Roberto Calderon, former president of Mexico, and Nicholas Stern, who wrote an important 2006 report on the economics of climate change for the British government, published the **Better Growth, Better Climate Report** in 2014. The executive summary recommends “introduc[ing] strong and predictable carbon prices . . . [to] sen[d] strong signals across the economy.”

The [proposals](#) from nine employer groups and several hundred CEOs of large companies, released a few months before the COP21, referred explicitly to this report, arguing that

The agreement should lay the foundations for the integration of a carbon pricing system in all major emitting countries, which:

• is robust and predictable, thereby stimulating action on emissions and enabling investment decisions in low-carbon technologies in the best cost-effective way;

• prevents from competitive distortions;

• is coordinated with a phasing-out of all existing carbon subsidies;

• relies on relevant tools such as emission trading schemes, or taxes/extensions of trading schemes

The demand for a carbon price extends beyond the green capitalist sectors. In June 2015, six major oil companies — the British Gas Group, BP, Eni, Royal Dutch Shell, Statoil, and Total — wrote an [open letter](#) to the United Nations “urging governments to speed up their policy response to provide much stronger carbon pricing.” ExxonMobil did not sign, but, in a [press release](#) at the end of the Paris talks, the fossil fuel giant enumerated the “key principles” of a climate policy. It concluded:

Policymakers around the world currently are considering a variety of legislative and regulatory options to

achieve these ends. Among the various proposals, ExxonMobil believes a revenue-neutral carbon tax [that does not increase the tax burden] would be . . . the best way to meet them.

Capital’s efforts to shape the future of climate regulation will only increase. COP21 didn’t eliminate the threat of climate change. The agreement amounts to a declaration of intentions, and there is a gap of approximately 2° C between those intentions and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) decided by states. The “high-level strategic dialogue” is supposed to address this gap in the future, and the conversation continues today, underpinned more than ever by corporate interests. These multinationals insist that they must design the energy transition because they “not the public sector” will implement it.

Enter the Republicans

More than anything, corporations want a global carbon price. How this price should be realized, however, remains up for debate. So far, discussions vary based on national and regional experiences. Some advocate the creation of new emissions trading markets, like those in the European Union, California, Quebec, the northeastern United States, and six regions of China. Others want to levy a carbon tax, like the one British Columbia tested.

The ranks of carbon-tax supporters unexpectedly swelled last month when eight grandees of the Republican Party — yes, the party of climate-denier Donald Trump — put forward a concrete carbon tax formula.

The Republicans’ frame their carbon tax plan as a “neutral” tax that won’t enlarge the “tax burden.” They also want to implement it immediately in the United States rather than wait for a global carbon price.

On a superficial level, the proposal is kind of amazing. Taking up an idea first proposed by prominent climatologist James Hansen, the plan

calls for a carbon tax that would grow each year, the revenues of which would be fully and equally paid back to citizens. Every man, woman, and child would receive the same amount of money.

The authors are conservative heavyweights, including James Baker III (secretary of state under President George H. W. Bush), Henry Paulson (secretary of the treasury under George W. Bush, formerly CEO of Goldman Sachs), Martin Feldstein (president of Ronald Reagan’s economic council), George Schultz (Reagan’s secretary of state, Richard Nixon’s secretary of treasury and labor), and Rob Walton (former Walmart CEO).

Their eight-page [proposal](#), entitled “The Conservative Case for Carbon Dividend,” was written for the Climate Leadership Council (CLC), a think tank that aims to “mobilize the leaders of the world opinion around the most effective, popular and equitable climate solutions.”

The proposal has four components. First, a forty-dollar-per-ton carbon tax would be levied when fossil fuels enter the American economy — at mines, wells, or ports. This amount will increase every five years.

Second, it is a “neutral tax,” the proceeds of which will be paid in full to American citizens, including children, in the form of a per-capita quarterly dividend, identical for all and tax-free. At the initial rate, a family of four could expect an average annual dividend of \$2,000.

Third, an adjustment mechanism would be put in place at the borders to avoid degrading the US economy’s competitiveness. American companies that export to countries without a carbon price will receive a discount on the domestic carbon tax, and imports from these countries will be taxed on the basis of their carbon content. These funds would go to the citizen dividend. This element allows the United States to move forward before other nations agree on the world carbon price while still pressing for its introduction.

Finally, regulations “no longer

necessary upon the enactment of a rising carbon tax” would be abolished: Much of the EPA’s regulatory authority over carbon dioxide emissions would be rolled back, including an outright repeal of the Clean Power Plan.

The proposal also calls for the complete withdrawal of the anti-coal measures Obama enacted to meet the American NDC. The authors justify this demand by saying: “To build and sustain a bipartisan consensus for a regulatory rollback of this magnitude, the initial carbon tax rate should be set to exceed the emissions reductions of current regulations.”

The Egg of Columbus

The proposal’s paradox is obvious: while it’s supposed to meet the challenge of climate change, it does not quantify “and indeed hardly mentions “how the plan would impact emissions. In fact, the authors’ motivation seems more economic and political than ecological and social. They use anxiety about climate change and discontent with austerity to push through their agenda. While their method is more subtle than Trump’s, they share the president’s reactionary urges, notably with regard to protectionism and dismantling the EPA.

Economically, the proposal takes up green capitalism’s classic arguments: introducing a carbon price will stimulate technological innovation, increase investment prospects (through “large-scale substitution of energy and transportation infrastructures”), and give companies, especially in the energy sector, the stability they need to plan ahead. They write:

[I]f investors know that a carbon tax will increase steadily over time, the stimulatory effect of the final tax rate would be felt almost immediately for infrastructure and utility projects, especially ones that have long-term paybacks. In addition, forward-looking households would have an incentive to borrow.

Further, the end of regulation would “give companies the flexibility to reduce emissions in the most efficient way.” The carbon tax would produce positive effects all around: on “growth through its dynamic effects on consumption and investment” and on consumer behavior, too.

The authors connect the “economic insecurity” that their proposal would help alleviate to the global rise in populism, which “threatens the current policy consensus in favor of liberalized trade and investment.” While this threat “does not lend itself to easy answers,” they write, “a carbon dividends program provides a rare exception.” As “a simple idea that strengthens the economy and elevates the economic prospects of the nation’s disaffected,” the dividend can “redirect populist energy in a socially beneficial” “that is, neoliberal” “direction.” Basically, the authors use populism to fight populism, as evidenced by their appeal: “we the People deserve to be compensated when others impose climate risks and emit gases that trap heat in our shared atmosphere.”

The proposal’s ideology will appeal to more traditional conservatives, too. The plan’s authors present the tax-and-dividend scheme as an ideal strategy for “shrinking the overall size of government.” They write:

Eliminating or phasing out an array of energy-related regulations would reduce government bureaucracy, promote economic growth and free up the financial and personnel resources now allocated to administer and comply with these programs. A gradually increasing carbon tax would also eliminate the rationale for ever more heavy-handed regulations of greenhouse gas emissions in future years.

Like Trump, the authors attack the EPA’s regulatory role, but they do so in the name of the environment. They insist:

[T]he one-to-one relationship between carbon tax revenue and dividends [must] be maintained as the plan’s longevity, popularity and transparency all hinge on this. Allocating carbon tax proceeds to other purposes [like

investments in renewables] would undermine popular support for a gradually rising carbon tax, and the broader rationale for far-reaching regulatory reductions.

That is, they will win support from the plan by paying off consumers, who otherwise might object to further cuts to the United States’ regulatory framework.

The authors also think that their proposal fits into the country’s larger foreign policy goals, claiming it will “stabiliz[e] an unstable world.” They take into account both the American people’s weariness in the face of war and the United States’s desire to preserve and strengthen its imperialist leadership. “Stabilizing the world,” for Baker and friends, means giving the United States “energy independence.” A carbon tax, they argue, would “encourage domestic nuclear energy, further promoting climate stability and America’s energy independence.” Such independence “would . . . reduce the need to protect or seek to influence politically vulnerable oil-producing regions,” bolstering national security.

Finally, the plan would “consolidate[e] conservative leadership.” They explain:

Recent polls indicate that 64 percent of Americans worry a great deal or a fair amount about climate change, while a clear majority of Republicans acknowledge that climate change is occurring. Meanwhile, one telling survey finds that 67 percent of Americans support a carbon tax with proceeds returned directly to them, including 54 percent of conservative Republicans.

People might disagree about the role humanity plays in climate change, Baker and his associates concede, but the “evidence” is “growing too strong to be ignored” and the risks “are too big and should be hedged.” For the authors, “[t]he opposition of many Republicans to meaningfully address climate change reflects poor science and poor economics, and is at odds with the party’s own noble tradition of stewardship.” Further, Americans under the age of thirty-five, Latinos, and Asians “notably, the groups

with the highest population growth – are the most concerned about climate change. The GOP “ignores this reality at its own peril.”

The strategic conclusion is clear: “It is incumbent upon the GOP to lead the way rather than look the other way.” Republicans now have a rare opportunity to set the terms of a lasting market-based climate solution that warrants bipartisan, industry, and public support. No less important, this is an opportunity to demonstrate the power of the conservative canon by offering a more effective, equitable, and popular climate policy based on free markets, smaller government, and dividends for all Americans. As three of the authors wrote in a New York Times forum, the four combined pillars invite “novel coalitions”:

Environmentalists should like the long-overdue commitment to carbon pricing. Growth advocates should embrace the reduced regulation and increased policy certainty, which would encourage long-term investments, especially in clean technologies. Libertarians should applaud a plan premised on getting the incentives right and government out of the way. Populists should welcome the distributive impact.

Mixed Reviews

A *Financial Times* editorial praised the proposal, certifying its neoliberal authenticity:

There is nothing intrinsically statist about correcting a price to incorporate the true costs of production – in this case, the environmental cost of carbon emissions – while leaving the wider market untouched.

The British newspaper continued wickedly: “Accepting that principle would make intelligent economics, rather than ideology, the underpinning of the US approach to climate change.” Touché.

Some of the anticipated members of Baker and friends’ “novel coalitions” immediately fell into line. Democrat Lawrence Summers, for example, shows that the eight conservatives are

right to bank on a bipartisan consensus. Summers [wrote](#) that he “strongly supports” the proposal, even agreeing to abandon environmental regulations in favor of price incentives: “Some of my friends may not completely agree, but I think the replacement of command-and-control regulation with such a tax is a positive step. It will reduce uncertainty and thereby encourage investment.”

Part of the environmentalist movement also welcomed the CLC’s proposal, underscoring Naomi Klein’s assertion that the green right is largely confused by green capitalism, if not by capitalism itself.

Mark Tercek helpfully illustrates this confusion. Former managing director at Goldman Sachs, Tercek now runs The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a million-member organization that manages thousands of square kilometers of protected land all over the world. The value of the TNC’s assets likely exceeds \$5 billion, and oil company representatives sit on its board of directors.

Tercek also cowrote [Nature’s Fortune](#), a book that argues that we should safeguard the environment because it represents a massive source of profit. Protecting the natural world, for Tercek, comes down to making protection attractive to investors. This strategy entails putting a price on everything, especially carbon, so his reaction to the proposal should not come as a surprise: “We should all welcome the carbon dividend proposal announced by the Climate Leadership,” he [wrote](#). “And as our Republican friends come out, I hope that Democrats and environmentalists will happily welcome them to a new, bipartisan conversation on this carbon dividend proposal.”

Unfortunately for Baker and his co-authors, their own camp didn’t roll out the welcome mat. Rupert Darwall – historian, member of ultra-conservative think tank the Center for Policy Studies, and Trump supporter – [exemplifies this position](#). Darwall’s book [The Age of Global Warming: A History](#) nicely illustrates how climate denialism fits into the Republican Party’s dominant “[reactionary mind](#).”

Granted, the authors of the “Conservative Case for Carbon Dividend” recognize this obstacle. Regardless of what (or who) caused climate change, they argue, Republicans have an obligation to try and prevent the threat it poses. But this argument begs the question: why limit anthropogenic emissions if they do not cause climate change?

Darwall zeroes in this weak point, writing that “no one in their right mind would think of taxing CO2 if it were considered harmless and essential to life, which of course it is,” and calls the proposal nothing but the “climate hysteria of the elites.”

Darwall’s position does not come simply from ties to climate deniers. More profoundly, his conspiratorial ideology makes him insensitive to reason – even the imperialist “reason” that, if the United States withdraws from the Paris Accords, it will allow China to take a leadership role in the energy transition and vastly increase its power on the global stage.

People like Darwall believe that international competitors invented “climate hysteria” to prevent the United States from using its enormous fossil reserves and becoming “great again.” China takes first place in wind and solar? So much the better, Darwall argues, because that will increase the price of its exports, while coal, shale gas, and cheap tar sands will guarantee the competitiveness of the US economy.

In one [article](#), Darwall asks Trump to learn from George W. Bush’s experience: Bush began his second term by denouncing Kyoto, but then Tony Blair bombarded him at the G8 summit. At Gleneagles in 2005, Bush yielded and opened the door to Obama’s climate policy, which, Darwall claims, favors China. The new president must learn this lesson and “stand up to the world.” This advice would be laughable if the stakes weren’t so high.

Reconsidering the

Hansen Proposal

The CLC's proposal, despite objections from climate deniers, could shape public consensus in a real way. The reason is climate denial is unbearable in the long term. As Tercek puts it, "In their hearts many Republicans in Congress know that we need to act, but they are imprisoned in their anti-climate position by fierce partisan politics and the threat of interest group money supporting their primary opponents." Nobody knows when "the day for the prison break" will come, but the Left needs to seriously consider its position.

James Baker and his colleagues didn't invent the tax-and-dividend idea: prominent American climatologist James Hansen originally formulated the plan. Former director of the NASA Goddard Institute, Hansen has been a climate activist since his retirement. He sounded the warming alarm as early as 1988 in a testimony before a congressional committee. An eminent scientist, humanist, and man of conviction, Hansen has been arrested several times for participating in actions against coal-fired power plants and the Keystone XL pipeline. His personality partly explains his proposal's success in some left-wing and ecologist circles.

In a deposition before Congress in 2009, Hansen first suggested a carbon fee and dividend. His reasoning was sound. He rightly understood that climate policy can only succeed if it has majority support: that is, if it echoes, to some extent, growing anti-austerity sentiment. His proposal was designed to do just that.

As he explains in [Storms of My Grandchildren](#):

Low-income people can gain by limiting their emissions. People with multiple houses, or who fly around the world a lot, will pay more in increased prices than they obtain in the dividend. . . . If the funds are distributed 100 percent to the public, the public will allow the fee to rise to high levels, in contrast to the relatively ineffectual carbon price characterizing cap-and-trade or a pure carbon tax.

Hansen knows we need to change the energy infrastructure but notes that the transition will take several decades. Given the urgency, a fee-and-dividend system is the only way to effectively reduce emissions and avoid runaway climate change. He sees this proposal as the central lever of a popular policy that would also include energy savings, a ban on exploiting unconventional fossil fuels, the closure of coal-fired power plants not equipped with carbon capture and sequestration, soil management to increase carbon storage, and the development of so-called fourth generation nuclear power.

Hansen's approach convinced one segment of the Left. In 2013, John Bellamy Foster, well known for [Marx's Ecology](#), wrote a long [article](#) for the Monthly Review addressing the proposal. Foster expressed numerous reservations, writing that "the Hansen exit strategy for all of its strengths is itself insufficient" and "does not go far enough." (For a reply by James Bellamy Foster and Ian Angus see "[Ecosocialists debate James Hansen's climate change exit strategy](#)".)

"Despite its progressive features," he writes, "it is mostly a top-down, elite-based strategy" that doesn't address "the question of capitalism and the accumulation imperative that drives such a system." Foster maintains, therefore, that "a real solution demands a radical alteration in social priorities," a "much larger social transformation that can only be unleashed by means of mass-democratic mobilization," in short, "a revolutionary transformation."

Nonetheless, Foster strongly supported the dividend tax, viewing it as "the only feasible approach for getting carbon emissions down rapidly." He praised Hansen for paying attention to class: "The significance of Hansen's approach to climate change, beyond his grasp of climate science itself, derives largely from his class analysis, his populist frame, his internationalism, and his dire realism," pointing out that "[w]ithout a much higher carbon price that reflects the real cost of carbon dioxide (including its environmental costs), there is no hope of avoiding disaster given the nature of the

prevailing social/economic system."

Foster's position seems hard to reconcile. On the one hand, he takes a revolutionary stance, consistent with his analysis of global warming as a consequence of capitalist accumulation. On this basis, he logically rejects any step-by-step strategy: "[n]o gradual exit is possible," he writes, "time is too short." On the other hand, he considers Hansen's proposal "the crucial first step that must be taken if irreversible climate change is to be avoided," calling it "a calculated attempt to push through the maximum plan that the regime of capital could conceivably accept."

Foster struggles with the inherent contradiction at the heart of Hansen's proposal, which is really a populist variant on the neoliberal doctrine that claims we can combat the destruction of the environment without fighting accumulation, without creating binding targets for pollution reduction, and without innovative collective practices that generate new cultural values. The fee-and-dividend system gives pollutants a market price so that companies will reorient their investments and consumers will change their habits.

To escape this contradiction, Foster argues that Hansen's proposal is "objectively revolutionary" because it will trigger the anticapitalist dynamic necessary for any long-term climate stabilization plan:

The greatest potential of Hansen's steadily increasing carbon fee and dividend is that its results would reverberate in every aspect of the society and economy. It would make clear as never before at the level of everyday life the class nature of carbon footprints and the increasing destruction of the planet as a place of human habitation.

Foster even invokes the authority of the *Communist Manifesto* to drive his point home: And it would soon be evident that the radical kinds of changes that would need to be introduced into the whole constellation of production, distribution, and consumption relations could not "be effected except

by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production.”

Foster’s belief in the proposal’s anticapitalist cred rests on the idea that giving, say, \$2,000 a year to all American households has a “class character.” The ease with which eight Republican leaders have taken up the fee-and-dividend idea, however, should give cause for doubt.

What, precisely, constitutes a class demand? It must make the exploited recognize that society is divided into antagonistic classes, determined by their relations to production and property. In the capitalist mode of production, which constantly reproduces social inequality, distributing an identical sum of money to all citizens does not reveal this class antagonism. In fact, it conceals it. Everyone will pay the tax “because the companies will pass it on to the consumers (at least partly)” and everyone will be paid by it. The per-capita dividend would have a slight redistributive effect, but not enough to give it a “class character.”

Not the Only Feasible Approach

For Foster and his followers, who include [Ian Angus](#), founder of the excellent *Climate and Capitalism* site and our comrade Alan Thornett of Socialist Resistance, the urgency of global climate change justifies supporting Hansen. They argue that the dividend tax is the only feasible approach in the current context “the maximum that the capital regime could reasonably accept,” as Foster puts it.

[Alan Thornett](#) elaborated on this idea:

We need a complete change over to renewable energy, an end to productivism, a huge programme of

energy conservation, an integrated transport policy and a big reduction in the use of the car, the localisation of food (and other) production where possible, land reform, water conservation, food sovereignty, a big reduction in meat consumption, the protection of habitats and 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 for their introduction. . . . The problem with this, to put it crudely, is that we do not appear to be on the verge of world revolution and therefore when it eventually comes it may be too late to do very much.

While climate change does pose an extremely serious threat, it isn’t true that the tax-and-dividend scheme marks the limit of policy that capital would accept, nor that the other proposals would require a “world revolution” before being enacted.

For example, a public plan that insulates and renovates buildings “starting with public and parapublic buildings” could be implemented without destroying the capitalist system; many cities have introduced free public transport; citizen associations organize consumption patterns based on local organic agriculture; the peasant trade unions of Via Campesina are working on food sovereignty and carbon-storing cultivation methods; indigenous peoples defend the forest and other natural resources in their territories; sectors of the labor movement are calling for the creation of “energy democracy” by socializing the energy industry and retraining workers; and hundreds of thousands of people are mobilizing against fossil infrastructure.

The difference between these projects and the fee-and-dividend proposal is not that the former will take time to develop whereas the latter can be implemented immediately. Rather, the abovementioned movements belong to a social strategy that allies with the exploited and the oppressed to develop an ecosocialist alternative, while Hansen’s and the CLC’s proposals entail the quest for a political consensus around so-called

win-win-win legislation.

Recent developments in Seattle help demonstrate this difference. The Washington state climate movement was building an alliance with trade unions, communities of color, women’s organizations, indigenous peoples, and other oppressed groups. A current within this movement believed that the climate emergency required a political agreement between Democrats and Republicans, achievable only around a carbon tax, which it got on the ballot last November. (The proposal differed somewhat from Hansen’s. It lost, 40.75 percent to 59.25 percent.) The two strategies involved very different relationships with social movements.

[David Roberts](#) summed up the case in these terms:

The Left is under pressure from its social justice wing to make climate part of a larger progressive movement. At the same time, it is still under pressure from centrists and wonks to make climate policy bipartisan, and that pressure will only grow more intense when the number of Republican lawmakers willing to negotiate on climate grows (from its current tiny handful).

But even the full distribution of tax proceeds to citizens would not guarantee that climate policy has socially just effects. That demand would require more than an increase in individual incomes “a boost that consumers, by the way, could use to buy a SUV. As Roberts put it:

low-income communities don’t just need tax relief; they need resilient infrastructure, access to jobs, and training in the clean energy economy. Union workers don’t just need tax relief; they need transition assistance, retraining, and protection for the industries in which many of their members work.

Transition, in other words, requires collective projects and investment. Roberts asks, “If a price on carbon doesn’t fund that investment, what will?” The question becomes all the more pertinent since each proposal under discussion is based on the dogma of the carbon tax’s “fiscal

neutrality.”

Funding isn’t the only thing at stake. The Left also needs to adopt a strategy that can respond to these challenges in terms of programs on the one hand and collective practices that generate new cultural values on the other. This point is essential: how can we imagine fairly exiting the climate crisis without practices of self-organization, control, and self-management that link social and environmental demands? Such techniques would enable the exploited, oppressed, and alienated to develop an alternative to bourgeois consumerist and productivist ideology. The tax-dividend does not favor them in any way.

Not the Only Effective Proposal

Left-wing supporters of the fee and dividend claim that it is the only way to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions “in the current context” because the dividend will guarantee popular support for a policy that would increase the price of carbon (to about \$150-200/ton of CO₂).

Assuming companies accept these levels, we must show that the tax would reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Hansen says a ten-dollar-per-ton tax, increasing by ten dollars each year, would reduce emissions by 30 percent in ten years, when the tax would reach one hundred dollars per ton. Three responses can be made to this claim.

First, this doesn’t improve on the climate plan developed under Obama after COP21, which called for a 26 to 28 percent reduction between 2015 and 2025 through regulation. Second, like Obama’s objective, Hansen’s proposal has barely more ambition than the one that the United States should have achieved in 2012 by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol.

Finally, and crucially, Hansen’s own example to Congress questions these estimates: a \$115 fee for every ton of carbon dioxide emitted from fossil fuel “equivalent to a \$1 increase per gallon of gasoline, or about 8 cents per kilowatt hour in electricity

charges” would generate \$670 billion in dividends. Each adult “legal resident” would receive one share, equal to \$3,000 a year. A family with two children would receive around \$9,000 a year, with \$750 deposited into its bank account each month. There is no connection between the tax, the dividend, and emissions reductions. Some time after the climatologist first formulated his proposal, gasoline prices in the United States increased by about \$1.20/gallon, in two years, not in ten. The effect on consumption “and therefore on emissions” remained very limited: less than a 3 percent reduction [occurred](#).

In general, there are two possible mechanisms for reducing emissions: regulation and taxation. Hansen clearly believes the second will be more effective than the first. He also underlines the tax’s legislative simplicity when compared to cumbersome regulatory mechanisms.

We should think carefully before supporting him on these points. Regulation designed to meet environmental objectives guarantees a result, while price incentives do not; the tax’s environmental outcome will depend on market responses. In other words, regulation prioritizes environmental constraints “such as the volume of greenhouse gas emissions or the atmospheric concentration of these gases” and their corresponding social effects. Taxation, in contrast, prioritizes companies’ economic constraints by making costs and profits predictable. Put this way, it seems obvious that the Left should favor the first method.

In practice, however, the United States and other countries implement regulation through cap-and-trade policies. As the name implies, these systems combine a cap on emissions and the commercialization of emission rights. The latter, in fact, represents an escape from the former. That explains why employers push to relax cap and trade through multiple and complex market mechanisms like the “Clean Development Mechanism” (CDM) in the Global South that provide them exchangeable emissions credits, including carbon credits coming from tree plantation. Cap and

trade becomes more “trade” and less “cap” and is thus less and less effective.

The regulatory burden that Hansen denounces is partly a product of this development. Consider the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS): its relative inefficiency does not come from the cap on emissions but from the fact that businesses regularly circumvent the cap through the free allocation of excess emission rights, which are exchangeable and considered equivalent to the credits generated by the “Clean Development Mechanism.” In short, regulation becomes more inefficient thanks to multinationals’ political influence and carbon’s commodification. To draw an argument in favor of a purely commercial mechanism “the tax” would constitute a major strategic error for the Left.

Moreover, the tax-dividend system has not proven more effective than cap and trade. In Vancouver, the Liberal Party introduced a neutral tax on corporate and household emissions in 2008, which started at ten Canadian dollars per ton of CO₂ and increased to thirty Canadian dollars four years later. Poor families and small businesses received partial tax breaks as a mode of redistribution. The [result](#)? Emissions reduced between 5 and 15 percent “not much more than what California achieved through cap and trade.

Fee-and-dividend boosters will argue that the Vancouver system differs from what Hansen proposed. Indeed: the tax is low, and its revenues are not fully redistributed to the households. But if, as Foster suggests, we consider the “maximum of what the capital regime could reasonably accept,” then we must consider the tax rate and the redistribution scheme in the context of global competitiveness. This brings us to the last point of our development: the international dimension of the case.

Nor Internationalist

The Left must put the fee-and-dividend model into a global context, seriously

taking into account the differentiated responsibilities between the North and South. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) stipulates that the fight against global warming must recognize that different countries have different responsibilities and different capacities to cope with the consequences of climate change. Efforts need to be fairly divided between so-called developed countries, which carry most of the historic responsibility for the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and the poorest countries, which carry virtually none.

Imperialist nations have been fighting this principle of North-South justice for years. The Copenhagen COP in 2009 failed in part because these countries refused to comply with the sharing requirements.

The next year, the Cancun COP put the issue on the back burner. Rather than arguing over how to divide responsibility, governments decided to try to reach a global agreement by asking each nation to come up with the NDC it could assume. The Paris agreement came out of this bottom-up method, producing the gap between the official target (1.5-2° C maximum warming) and the temperature rise projected on the basis of the NDC (2.7-3.7° C). This gap needs to be filled, and future negotiations will focus on “rais[ing] the level of ambition” of the NDCs. The thorny issue of North-South burden-sharing will likely pop up again.

Hansen recognizes the Global North’s major historical responsibility and the Global South’s right to development. But his proposal potentially contradicts this principle. In Hansen’s opinion, a few high-emitting countries should agree to introduce the fee and dividend, which market mechanisms would then spread. Capitalists, however, will not allow the tax to rise from year to year until the total decarbonization of the economy: even the proposed forty-dollar-per-ton fee would undermine competitiveness, and employers would not fail to squeeze jobs.

Hansen formulates his response to

these questions in a recent [article](#), which closely resembles Baker and friends’ “Conservative Case.” Hansen calls for “duties on fossil-fuel-derived products from non-participating nations and fee rebates to domestic manufacturers for goods shipped to non-participating nations.”

The so-called developing countries that export goods to the United States would de facto be charged a global price of carbon aligned with the American price, which does not take the differentiated responsibilities to climate change into account. Hansen sees the contradiction, but argues that “fossil fuels cannot be phased out if some countries are allowed to export products made with untaxed fossil fuels.” He goes on:

Developing countries have rights, recognized in the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities, and leverage to achieve economic assistance, which should be tied to the improved agricultural and forestry practices needed to limit trace gas emissions and store more carbon in the soil and biosphere.

In this way, “[i]ssues raised by ‘coercive cooperation’ implicit in border adjustments will be subdued.” Hansen’s perspective looks more like enlightened imperialism than internationalism.

The Market Can’t Be the Solution

This is not the first time that climate experts have attempted to formulate a market strategy based on the price of carbon that takes into account both climatic constraints and social justice. Before James Hansen, Anil Agarwal developed another well-intentioned market-based solution. While head of the Center for Environmental Studies, Agarwal proposed the “Contraction and Convergence” scheme.

The plan called on all countries to agree to a drastic reduction in global emissions (“contraction”) combined with an equalization of per-capita emissions rights (“convergence”), allowing the Global South to catch up to the Global North through clean

technologies. Agarwal suggested that tradable emissions allowances be distributed to any developing country that did not reach its per-capita quota. Northern countries insufficiently reducing their emissions should then buy these rights and the inflow of capital would enable the Southern countries to buy technologies for carbon-free development. Within the context of such an agreement, Agarwal believed that these countries would accept the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).

Agarwal’s plan had been popularized by the Global Commons Institute and supported by eminent scientists. It never came to fruition, for the simple reason that market mechanisms cannot protect the environment or the welfare of humankind. They are not tools that can be put to the service of any cause: they belong to a mode of production based on competing for the rights to profit from the exploitation of human labor and natural resources.

Nicholas Stern wrote that “[c]limate change is the largest market failure the world has ever seen.” This failure does not come from any fault in the market but from the market’s very nature. Trying to use market mechanisms to combat a climate disaster caused by the market economy is as counterintuitive as proposing we build tanks to build hospitals or schools.

Capitalist dynamics of accumulation have caused this ecologic crisis. The terrible dangers this crisis poses to humanity can only be averted by radical anticapitalist measures that aim to produce less, make different things, and employ different technologies.

Some carbon tax measures may be necessary (a tax on aircraft fuel, for example), but pricing pollution cannot be the primary mechanism. We have to confront the dynamics of accumulation, which the fee-and-dividend simply cannot do. Instead, it will create more market and less regulation – therefore more growth and more accumulation. It moves in the opposite direction.

Marx writes that “[t]he only possible freedom is that social man, the

associated producers, rationally manage their exchange of matter with nature." Marx's conclusion in Capital anticipates our current urgency: "The essential condition for this development is the reduction of the working day." We should share more to live better, enjoying the true

wealth: human relations.

James Hansen's proposal cannot be the axis of an alternative, nor the "first step" of an "exit strategy in social justice." The solution can only come "or not come" from the

convergence of the concrete struggles of the exploited and the oppressed.

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[Jacobin "The Right's Green Awakening".

A big step towards the Anthropocene

18 October 2016, by **Alan Thornett**

Global warming, caused by CO2 emissions from the use of fossil fuels, is accelerating. Each successive year is now the hottest on record. Fifteen of the sixteen hottest years on record have occurred within this century. Last year was the hottest by a wide margin. There were exceptional temperatures in Spain, Austria, in parts of Asia, Australia and South America. In May a heatwave in India claimed more than 2,000 lives and ranked as the fifth deadliest on record. A heatwave in Southern Pakistan killed more than 1,200 people. The litany goes on; spelled out in ever more extreme events.

A recent study [9] has shown that human activity has destroyed a tenth of Earth's remaining wilderness in the last 25 years and there may be none left within a century if trends continue.

Against this disastrous background, a uniquely important scientific decision has just been taken by a little known (but highly significant) body known as Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), [10] comprised of 38 Earth systems scientists and convened by geologist Jan Zalasiewicz of Leicester University. It involves the adoption of the "Anthropocene" as a new geological time unit.

This is a decision that, in my view, reflects (and is a response to) the full depth of the ecological and climate crisis we face today and its implications.

The idea was first advanced in 2000

by the Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul J Crutzen "who won the Nobel Prize in 1995 for his pioneering research on stratospheric ozone depletion" and Eugene F Stoermer, a biologist from the University of Michigan.

Their case was (and is) that the impact of human beings on the planet is now of such an order that the current geological epoch, the Holocene (the interglacial period), which has existed for the past 11,700 years, should be brought to an end and superseded by the "Anthropocene", or the "age of humans".

The division of the Earth's 4.5 bn year history (into eons, eras, periods and epochs) is determined by the International Chronostratigraphic Chart (Geological Time Scale), which is administered by the International Commission on Stratigraphy.

We are currently in the Phanerozoic eon of the Cenozoic era and the quaternary period, which is further divided into two epochs: the Pleistocene and Holocene. The Pleistocene was characterised by climatic fluctuations and periodic ice ages) in the Northern hemisphere, the last of which was 11700 years ago leaving us in the current epoch of the Holocene , a much more stable epoch conducive to the global growth of the human species.

The adoption process

Practical steps towards adoption of the Anthropocene began in 2009 when the AWG (of which Crutzen is a member) was asked to study the proposition and make a recommendation.

The AWG reached a decision during 2016, however "by a majority of 35-1" to propose the endorsement of the change to the Anthropocene. They agreed that the concept is scientifically and "stratigraphically" sound, and that the Anthropocene should be formally added to the International Chronostratigraphic Chart and a new epoch declared.

This rather dramatic conclusion was presented to the 35th plenary of the International Geological Congress which took place in Cape Town from August 27 - September . Afterwards Chris Rapley, a climate scientist from University College London, stressed the importance of the decision this way in an interview with the Guardian:

"Since the planet is our life support system" we are essentially the crew of a largish spaceship "interference with its functioning at this level and on this scale is highly significant. If you or I were crew on a smaller spacecraft, it would be unthinkable to interfere with the systems that provide us with air, water, fodder and climate control. But the shift into the Anthropocene tells us that we are

playing with fire, a potentially reckless mode of behaviour which we are likely to come to regret unless we get a grip on the situation.’ (Guardian August 29th, 2016)

The tone he strikes is right. Such a momentous decision, if finally endorsed, would mean that for the first time a geological epoch had been determined by the impact of a single species rather than by the planet’s main flora and fauna composition or by geophysical events. It would (rightly) imply that humanity itself has now become a geophysical force equal to some of the great forces of nature such as meteor strikes, volcanic eruptions and tectonic movements that have previously brought about such changes.

The step the AWG has taken is crucial for all those who value the environment and want to defend it. It sounds the alarm, in a clear and unavoidable way, as to the full depth and character of the ecological crisis and the anthropological driving force behind it. Any tendency, to dismiss the Anthropocene as an obscure geological debate amongst the scientific community should be firmly rejected. The scientific community have, not for the first time, made a very important contribution to the defence of the planet.

A number of books have been published, in the course of the deliberations, backing the approach the AWG has been developing. These include *The Anthropocene: the Human Era and How it Shapes the Planet* by Christian Schwagerl (published in 2014 by Synergetic Press). It’s foreword by Paul Cruzen, describes the book as a ‘navigation system for the new world of the Anthropocene that lies before us’.

The AWG published its own book in 2014: *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene*, which sets out the evidential basis of their thinking. In 2015 Routledge published *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and Francois Gemenne, which an excellent introduction to a complicated subject. [11]

Recommendation

The recommendation is not the end of the story, of course. There is still a rigorous procedure to be completed before a new epoch can finally be adopted by the scientific community.

The proposal now forms the basis of a recommendation by the AWG to its parent body—the Sub-commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS). If it is supported there it will then go to the SQS’s parent body, the International Commission on Stratigraphy. It will still need to be ratified by the Executive Committee of the International Union of Geological Sciences—and by a 60% majority.

If this procedure is successfully completed the Anthropocene will then be officially added to the Geological Time Scale.

Despite the complexity of this procedure, the AWG’s recommendation is (according to those in a position to judge) likely to prove decisive, and there could be an official adoption of the Anthropocene within two or three years.

The date of the Anthropocene

Possibly the most controversial question the AWG dealt with was the precise date from which the Anthropocene epoch should be deemed to have started. They considered a range of propositions from the time modern humans entered the scene 160,000 years ago, the beginning of agriculture, the onset of industrialisation, the date of the invention of the steam engine, and various dates in the mid-20th century.

Behind this was the need for geologists, on the basis of their rules and conventions, to identify changes in the fossil record, in rock sediment or glacier ice for example, which mark the point at which the transition took place. Some AWG members argued for using the plutonium fallout from nuclear weapons testing in the early 1950s. There were plenty of other possibilities: plastic pollution, soot

from power stations, concrete particles, and even the bones left by the global proliferation of the domestic chicken.

The date they eventually came up with was mid-20th century (i.e. around 1950), which coincides with what they describe as the ‘Great Acceleration’ of human impact on the planet.

Whilst it is necessary to put a precise date on the Anthropocene it is not a single event but a long-term process of environmental damage that is becoming increasingly irreversible. The press release the AWG issued announcing of their conclusion points towards this:

‘Changes to the Earth System that characterize the potential Anthropocene Epoch include marked acceleration to rates of erosion and sedimentation, large-scale chemical perturbations to the cycles of carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and other elements, the inception of significant change to global climate and sea level, and biotic changes such as unprecedented levels of species invasions across the Earth. Many of these changes are geologically long lasting, and some are effectively irreversible.’

The left

In my view, the concept of the Anthropocene, not only broadly right, but goes to the heart of the debate on the ecological crisis today, and has implications for the kind of eco-socialism that is crucial for the ecological struggle in the 21st century. This does not mean that the concept is universally accepted amongst Marxist ecologists, however. In fact there is a vigorous, and ongoing, debate taking place, on the left, for and against it. Naomi Klein, for example opposes it.

I think, however, to argue against the Anthropocene is not only wrong but illogical since effectively contradicts the now widely accepted notion that climate change, and the wider ecological crisis, is an anthropologically generated process. Why not argue that climate change is a product of capitalism rather than

human activity.

One of the leading advocates of the Anthropocene is Marxist ecologist John Bellamy Foster; the editor of *Monthly Review*, and the author of the prestigious *Marx's Ecology - materialism and nature*. He spoke on the subject at the SWP's *Marxism-2016* in July.

His punch line was that the logic of the Anthropocene means that the term 'ecological crisis' is no longer an adequate description of today's situation. What we are facing today, he argued, is 'an earth system turning point'... 'a crisis of the entire earth system itself brought on by human beings'. This means, that humans have become a geological force in their own right changing the nature of the planet itself and resulting in an 'anthropogenic rift' in its biosphere.

One of the reasons he had been keen to speak there, he said, was that he wanted to urge the whole left to take the issue far more seriously. Leading speakers from the SWP, however, whilst saying that this idea was 'interesting' stopped short of endorsing it. Camilla Royle, the deputy editor of *International Socialism*, writing on the Anthropocene, [12] also finds the Capitalocene a 'useful' proposition, but again stops short of full endorsement. Another strong supporter the Anthropocene idea is Ian Angus, the Canadian Marxist ecologist and editor of the ecosocialist website *Climate & Capitalism*. He has written several articles to this effect, and has a book *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* to be released in October (2016), which I have not yet seen.

The capitalocene

The strongest and most coherent, but mistaken case, against the Anthropocene is made by the Marxist ecologist (and FI comrade) Andreas Malm, of Lund University in Sweden. Opposition to the Anthropocene, which he calls a 'myth', effectively forms the conclusion his (otherwise excellent) book *Fossil Capital* 'the rise of steam power and the roots of

global warming where he brands it as 'species thinking'. [13]

Malm's alternative proposal to the Anthropocene is the 'Capitalocene'. Such a designation, he argues, would be based on 'the geology not of mankind, but of capital accumulation.' (Page 391) Steam engines, he says, 'were not adopted by some natural-born deputies of the human species. By the nature of the social order of things, they could only be installed by the owners of the means of production.' [Emphasis original]... 'Is there any reason to consider it any more truly representative of 'the human enterprise' than the Luddites or the plug drawers or the preachers of steam demonology?' We should 'not mistake capitalists for human beings' he argues. (Page 267)

The Anthropocene, Malm argues: 'might be a useful concept and narrative for polar bears and amphibians and birds who want to know what species is wreaking such terrible havoc on their habitats, but, alas, they lack the capacity to scrutinize and stand up to the human actions; for those who may do so "other human beings" species thinking on climate change conduces to paralysis'. (Page 272)

Camilla Royal says that she is attracted to his idea but as the word "Anthropocene" has already entered common usage it may simply be too late to start proposing alternative terms - a rather strange argument when we are talking about the definition of an historical epoch.

Marxism or 'species thinking'

The concept of the Capitalocene is wrong. Andreas Malm appears to suggest that the Anthropocene, or any notion of assessing the environmental impact of modern humans on the planet as a species, runs counter to a class based (or Marxist) analysis of society. But why? The Anthropocene does not imply that all human are all equally responsible for their impact on the planet. The scientists that

proposed it don't think that. It makes no sense. It seems to suggest that people have no responsibility for our own species whilst capitalism exists and only assume this after capitalism is gone.

In fact, the Anthropocene concept is completely consistent with the approach of classical Marxism (Marx Engels and Morris) of human being as a living part of nature and not in conflict with it. They did not hesitate to talk about the impact of human beings.

In *The Dialectics of Nature* Engels wrote the following remarkable passage: 'At every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature' but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly'.

In other words, capitalism itself is a human activity, as Jason Moore argues: "human activity not only produces biospheric change, but relations between humans are themselves produced by nature".

I think we have a duty to deal with the impact of our own species on the biosphere of the planet, but we have to do so taking into account class divisions and the fact that responsibility is not equally shared. The rich and the powerful, and corporate interests are the driving force of such impact and clearly bear the main responsibility... This does not, however, mean that we can ignore the overall impact of our species on the viability of the planet. We would do so at our own peril.

The idea of the Capitalocene, in my view, is not just scientifically wrong but could lead to an underestimation of the depth and scope of the ecological crisis.

Malm is not alone on the left in proposing the Capitalocene.. His views are strongly reflected in two recently published books: *Anthropocene* or

Capitalocene edited by Jason W Moore (Kairos, 2016) and The shock of the Anthropocene by Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (Verso, 2016).

I don't think either of these books add much of substance to the position originally set out by Malm: i.e. that it is the capitalist system, not modern humans as a species, that are responsible for what is happening to the planet. They both correctly expand on the grossly ecologically destructive nature of capitalism.

Capitalism is indeed the most environmentally destructive system of society that modern humans have produced – with the possible exception of Stalinism. There is no dispute about that, but it's not the point. The question is not whether capitalism is an ecologically destructive system but whether the ecological crisis can be reduced to capitalism. To do so, in my view, is a far too narrow perspective from which to make a judgment on either the character of the epoch or the impact of modern humans on the planet. In the end, capitalism is a human activity.

While ecological destruction increased dramatically with the industrial revolution, the destructive impact of modern humans on the planet long preceded the arrival of both industrialisation and capitalism. In fact I agree with Camilla Royal on this when she says that – 'It seems premature to associate the Anthropocene so closely with the industrial revolution'.

She points out that Crutzen and Stoermer were clear that their proposal for the industrial revolution start date was just a suggestion and that they expected there would be further debate on the issue. She goes on to say that there is some justification for dating the start of the Anthropocene to a time – 'when humans caused the extinction of many large mammals or even to the first surviving evidence of any human activity' [Emphasis original] I agree with that as well.

Disproportionate impact

I have long argued that human beings have had a disproportionate impact on the planet throughout their 160,000-year history. As they (i.e. we) migrated out from Africa they wiped out most of the megafauna, big land animals and flightless birds they encountered, who were defenceless against their huge brains, remarkable hunting skills, and collective organisation – often going far beyond their immediate needs. A fifth of all species were eliminated in this way. This happened in Australia, New Zealand, Madagascar, Indonesia, the Americas and Europe. In Europe deforestation and the onset of farming methods transformed the medieval landscape beyond recognition.

Whilst this destruction was not a challenge to the epoch (i.e. the Holocene) as such, it was already clear that modern humans had an enormous capacity as an agency for change. We were a special case as far as our ability not only to change the environment but to destroy it. We also had a uniquely destructive relationship with other species in that all were vulnerable to our activity.

Today, we face the biggest extinction of species – 'the – sixth extinction' – since the demise of the dinosaurs 65m years ago. Forty per cent of all mammal species face a short to medium term threat of extinction against a background rate of one every 700 years. Amphibians are disappearing at staggering 45,000 times the background rate. This ultimately puts at risk all species on the planet, including, eventually, our own. Species extinction on this scale is not only at the heart of the ecological crisis today, but is the single most compelling factor in the case for the Anthropocene.

Industrialisation

The key mistake made by advocates of the Capitalocene is conflating industrialisation and the rise of capitalism. The ecological challenge represented by industrialisation itself: i.e. the invention of the steam engine,

the internal combustion engine, and the massive expansion of production and population made possible by these, whatever mode of production took control, was gigantic.

Whilst a socialist society (or more precisely an ecosocialist society) would create far better conditions to defend the planet, the absence of capitalism is not enough. For most of the 20th century capitalism ceased to exist over a third of the globe, in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, yet environmental destruction was at least as damaging as it had been under capitalism.

Environmental destruction started a long time before capitalism and will continue for a long time afterwards unless a viable sustainable alternative is fought for and constructed. This is what ecosocialism is about. Not just the struggle for a socialist society, but the conscious struggle for an ecologically sustainable socialist society. One that ends and reverses the drive for growth and that lives in harmony with nature and not at its expense – a fundamental change in our relationship, as human beings, with the planet we inhabit.

Big step forward

The AWG decision to recommend the Anthropocene was a remarkable achievement for Crutzen and Stoermer, who have campaigned long and hard for this decision with many frustrations along the way. In 2011 Crutzen, for example, along with the German environmental journalist Christian Schwägerl, showed his frustration at the slow progress being made:

– 'It's a pity we're still officially living in an age called the Holocene. The Anthropocene – 'human dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth' – is already an undeniable reality...

– 'For millennia, humans have behaved as rebels against a superpower we call – 'Nature.' In the 20th century, however, new technologies, fossil fuels, and a fast-growing population, resulted in a – 'Great Acceleration' of our own

powers. Albeit clumsily, we are taking control of Nature's realm, from climate to DNA. We humans are becoming the dominant force for change on Earth. A long-held religious and philosophical idea "humans as the masters of planet Earth" has turned into a stark reality. What we do now already affects the planet of the year 3000 or even 50,000.' (Climate Energy Policy and Politics pollution and Health Science and Technology

Asia., January 2011)

In the end the persistence of Crutzen and Stoermer paid off. And the result, if the AWG recommendation is accepted, will be a crucial addition to the armory of those who are struggling to save the planet from ecological destruction. It is a warning sign about how close we are to the point of no return.

Camilla Royal quotes Ian Angus, in terms with which I would entirely agree: "ecosocialists need to approach the Anthropocene project as an opportunity to unite an ecological Marxist analysis with the latest scientific research, in a new synthesis" "a socio-ecological account of the origins, nature, and direction of the current crisis in the Earth system'. And I would add to that "as a basis for what we do about it.

The ecosocialism debate: a response to Daniel Tanuro

23 October 2015, by Alan Thornett

It starts by highlighting the frightening new scientific evidence that has been produced by American glaciologists on the destabilisation of the Antarctic ice sheet (which is by far the biggest on earth) and the huge rise in the sea level that will inevitably result from this.

It goes on to address some of the issues that are the subject of debate, both inside and outside of the FI, amongst ecosocialists and left ecologists.

The first thing to welcome (in this regard) is the strong position the text takes on the biodiversity crisis. It not only recognises the scale of this crisis but makes it central to its analysis. It and makes reference to the concept of the sixth great extinction (of species) and argues (rightly) that we are experiencing the most catastrophic collapse of biodiversity since the demise of the dinosaurs sixty million years ago.

Most Marxist ecologists, including Daniel Tanuro, have long failed, in my view, to give the biodiversity crisis the centrality it deserves. My article arguing this "The environmental crisis and the environmentalist left.

I also welcome what Tanuro says about the rising human population of

the planet "which has been a taboo subject amongst Marxist ecologists for far too long. He accepts that the rising global human population is indeed an environmental problem and argues that we should aim to stabilise it at the current 7bn "which he calls the "demographic transition'. The global population is currently rising by 80,000,000 a year and shows no sign of declining.

He links it to the melting ice sheets and argues that the massive loss of arable and habitable land that will be lost to the rising sea level by the end of the century is incompatible with the projected increase in the human population to 9bn during that time scale (according to UN figures).

He is rightly rejects all authoritarian "solutions' to the rising global population whatever form they take. He argues that the "demographic transition' depends fundamentally on two elements: "the right of women to control their own fertility (in particular the right to free abortion in safe conditions) and a social security worthy of the name (in particular a pension system that enables older people to live decently without the help of numerous children).' I agree 100% with this. I would add to that lifting impoverished women out of poverty and giving them access to

education.

Fortunately the reactionaries and the authoritarians are far from the only voices in the population debate. There is a major body of opinion around the empowerment of women approach that can be related to and built on. For example the UN Cairo 1994 conference on population which adopted a Programme of Action which called on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, by 2015 or sooner.

He argues, rightly, that stabilising the global human population is not a solution to all the problems of the environment. Of course it is not. I don't accept, however, as he argues, that population stabilisation need be such a slow process or that it would have no positive role to play in the short to medium term.

Any reduction in the current rate of population increase would make a significant contribution on a range of environmental fronts. Some things, like lifting the impoverished women of the global South out of poverty, are contingent on an ongoing battle against globalised capitalism. Other things like providing women with reproductive services "based on a woman's right to choose "can be

done far more quickly given the political will.

Even raising basic awareness of the effects of rising population on the environment, and on peoples lives, can make a difference if it can become a factor for consideration when women make decisions on family size.

The debate on the role of capitalism

I agree with the section of the text that deals with the absurdity of the capitalist mode of production and its resulting productivism. It puts it this way:

“Capitalism is therefore by its essence productivist. It produces ever more commodities, which means appropriating and pillaging ever more natural resources, increasingly exploiting the labour force (either directly in production or indirectly in services and in the reproduction of the labour force), and increasingly destroying knowledge and logical alternatives to its own bulimic “logic”.

I don't agree, however, when it goes on to reject the existence of an “ecological crisis”. It puts it this way:

“The conclusion is glaringly obvious: it is not nature that is in crisis, it is capitalist society. We have arrived at a stage where the absurdity of this mode of production is seriously perturbing the relationship between humanity and the nature to which it belongs, to the point of posing a mortal threat to much of the human race. That is why I do not like the expression “ecological crisis”.

This makes no sense. Capitalism is indeed the most environmentally destructive system of society that the human species has produced, with the possible/probable exception of Stalinism. The environmental crisis, however, cannot be reduced to the role of capitalism in this way. This is a far too narrow and restrictive view of the ecological crisis.

The fact is that the (anthropogenic) ecological crisis existed long before

capitalism and will not, in my view, be resolved simply by its removal. This for me is where the concept of ecosocialism becomes so important.

A transitional approach

Despite this (error in my view) the text does not go on to endorse (as might seem logical) the dominant narrative on the ecological left that the answer to the ecological crisis is socialism—one solution revolution as I would call it.

(If we have only a few decades to prevent an ecological disaster then socialist revolution on a world scale as an answer is out of kilter with reality. There is not (even) any model of socialism, advocated by understood by any significant section of the left, that would be capable of building a sustainable socialist society and tackling the ongoing ecological crisis that would continue to after capitalism was gone.)

Tanuro puts it this way: “In my opinion, the task of revolutionaries in this context is not to stay on the side of the road distributing leaflets calling for a socialist response. These leaflets are certainly useful, but our task is also to build the mass movement and orient it towards anti-capitalist solutions.”

The text closely integrates the struggle against climate change and in defence of the environment into the class struggle as a whole and sees it as a part of an ongoing struggle for Socialism and the overthrow of capitalism. I won't rehearse it all here but the text says the following:

“The struggle that we must wage for the environment is a class struggle, an anti-capitalist struggle that encompasses virtually all other struggles and that has the potential to bring them all together. A struggle whose outcome will decide the choice between a humanity worthy of the name - that takes loving care of itself and of the nature to which it belongs - or the barbaric chaos of social and environmental destruction.”

The reference to nature here is crucial. We have to see ourselves (humanity) as a part of nature and not as its exploiter or its destroyer. This is what defines our responsibilities when it comes to the defence of the environment in the broadest sense. This is what ecosocialism is first and foremost about.

This, the text argues, means winning the argument over the seriousness of the situation. Rejecting the capitalist conception of growth, and the productivism that results from this, and fighting for a full transition to a carbon free energy system. It means shorter work time and a lower intensity of work and an emphasis on the quality of life rather the quantity of commodities. It puts it this way:

“Concerning the programme, I would say that those who think that the ecological question risks diverting us from anti-capitalist responses with which to counter austerity are seriously mistaken. The opposite is true: in reality, the urgency and the gravity of the environmental crisis give strong legitimacy to an extremely radical, revolutionary programme, whose keystone is the double expropriation/socialization of energy and of the financial sector, without compensation or buyback and under workers' control.”

It goes on: “We have to oppose all the major investment projects in the service of the fossil industry: the new airports, new pipelines, new motorways, new drilling, new mines, the new madness of shale gas, the new fads of geo-engineers who dream of providing Earth with a thermostat ... of which they would have control.”

All this takes the discussion forwards and I agree with it. We need, however, much more discussion in the FI on all aspects of the ecological crisis from its location in the revolutionary struggle and the kind of socialism we are talking about to the tactical questions of our day to day actively to defend the environment and oppose climate change in the here and now whilst capitalism still exists.

Let's find a way of having it.

21.10.15

Family Planning and the Environment

24 November 2014, by **Anne Hendrixson**

© Anne Hendrixson

Population growth, they argue, is responsible for environmental degradation, as well as other societal problems:

“Whether the average person alive today has between 1 and 2 children, or between 2 and 3 children, will largely determine whether our children live in a world that is safe, healthy, and sustainable, or crowded and polluted, with little if any nature, fewer resources and more crime.” [14].

Unfortunately, blaming environmental problems on population pressure is all too common, particularly among environmentalists. This thinking has a long tradition extending as far back as the late 1700s, when Thomas Malthus predicted that the rate of population growth would inevitably outpace food production.

Malthus’ forecast did not anticipate technological innovation or the demographic transition to lower birth rates, and was not accurate, but it did influence generations of environmental thinkers.

In the 1960s butterfly biologist Paul Ehrlich, with his 1968 *The Population Bomb* and non-profit group Zero Population Growth (now Population Connection), became one of most well known modern Malthusian thinkers. So did Garrett Hardin, with his influential essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” along with the Club of Rome and their best-selling book *Limits to Growth*.

Today, despite the sordid history of top-down population control programs violating reproductive and human rights and the major slowing of global population growth, many environmentalists still promote the view that population size is the primary cause of climate change and other environmental problems.

Books like Alan Weisman’s 2013 *Countdown* explores how we can reduce birth rates to save the planet. *Uncrowded* calls for smaller families. The Sierra Club promotes population reduction. Environmental groups and individuals like these promote family planning or one- or two-child families as the solution to some of the most pressing environmental problems we face.

As a long-time supporter of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, I believe that all people should have access to a range of contraception and safe abortion as part of overall health services. Family planning, however, is not the answer to our environmental problems.

Misguided Focus

Environmentalists’ focus on population © and ultimately on the bodies of those who produce children © is misguided and can lead to equally misguided action.

As ARROW (the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) points out, “The dangers of undue emphasis on population reduction to address climate change are clear. It jeopardizes decades of work to advance multifaceted, rights-respecting, environmentally sound and equitable development models.” [15].

Environmental degradation and climate change are urgent problems that need careful consideration and action. We should strive to better understand their sources, so we can arrive at socially just responses that benefit the environment, people and our communities.

This means recognizing when population trends like urbanization and density have an environmental

impact. However, it also requires challenging the notion that population is inevitably the source of environmental problems. We should take on what eco-socialists Ian Angus and Simon Butler call “populationism” in environmentalism.

Smaller family size is the global norm. The global average today is 2.53 children per family, down from 4.9 in the 1960s. Many countries, mainly in East Asia and Eastern Europe, have less than two children per family. Birthrates are down because of factors like improved health services, education and status of women, and increased urbanization.

In other countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the average family size is higher, with over four children per woman. Fertility rates are declining in those countries as well despite the lack of health services in many regions, and persistent poverty, high mortality and gender inequalities, which can contribute to high birth rates.

At the same time that family size is getting smaller, global population is growing due to what is called “population momentum.” This means that there are a high proportion of people in the population who are in childbearing years (15-44) and who will have children and add to the overall population. Population size is expected to grow through 2100, then plateau and slowly decline.

Even with the global shift towards smaller families, and the slower pace of population growth, many environmentalists claim that change is not happening fast enough. For example, the Sierra Club’s Global Population and Environment Program declares that “the combination of rapid population growth in developing countries, with unsustainable consumption in developed countries, is threatening the health and well-

being of families, communities, and our planet.” [16]

There are a number of problems with this way of thinking. First, babies and yet-to-be-born babies in areas like Sub-Saharan Africa are not responsible for existing environmental problems. The reverse is true: wealthy countries like the United States are responsible for burdening those babies with a legacy of global environmental degradation and climate change caused by long-term, irresponsible resource use by the overly-developed world.

These very real environmental problems require our creativity and persistent attention now. Averting future births will not help clean up toxic nuclear weapons contamination, like that at Manhattan Project’s Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State. Reducing population rates will not support those displaced by rising sea levels. Nor will it hold accountable those who are most responsible for climate change — like the U.S. military — for their carbon emissions.

As feminist peace activist Pat Hynes tells us, “the military has 1.4 million active duty people, or .0002 percent of the world’s population, generating 5 percent of climate pollution. The U.S. military enterprise is far and away the largest single climate polluter and contributor to global warming.” [17].

Whose Consumption?

A second problem with the Sierra Club’s stance is that it links consumption levels with population size and individual consumption. Consumption of resources is an important issue: wealthy nations consume more than less wealthy ones — but an overemphasis on individual consumption distracts from industrial and commercial consumption.

Corporations, like the military and the ultra-consuming, ultra-wealthy are the reason for a disproportionate share of resource depletion, carbon emissions, waste and pollution. These powerful actors should be held responsible for their actions.

As Ian Angus and Simon Butler point out in *Too Many People?* “those who claim slowing population growth will stop or slow environmental destruction are ignoring the real and immediate threats to life on our planet. Corporations and armies aren’t polluting the world and destroying eco-systems because there are ‘too many people,’ and they won’t stop if the birth rate is reduced.”

Yet, try to reduce birth rates many environmentalists will. The Sierra Club asserts that voluntary family planning is the way to hasten population reduction. In fact, they claim that increased use of family planning could reduce carbon emissions at an equal rate as stopping all tropical deforestation. [18].

This big statement can’t be backed up, however. The Sierra Club bases it on a publication from Population Action International, which in turn cites a study that never mentions family planning at all.

In fact, the article by Pacala and Socolow in *Science* (Volume 305, August 13, 2004 [19] discusses solving our climate problems through existing technologies, such as reducing deforestation and promoting soil conservation. Still, the Sierra Club tells us that family planning is a win-win, for women and the environment.

Another example is PopOffsets, a project of the British nonprofit organization Population Matters, which is backed by patron Paul Ehrlich among others. It claims to help individuals and groups offset their carbon footprint through donating funds to support family planning projects. Moneyed individuals can supposedly offset their air travel or luxury hotel stays by enabling others to limit their family size.

PopOffsets channels the funds to family planning projects in places like Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Utah, New York and Adelaide, Australia. Similar to the logic behind carbon offset programs for corporations, like REDD+, PopOffsets invites people to continue with their business as usual, while holding others accountable.

Claims that family planning directly benefits the environment are hard to

back up. The environmental group Worldwatch Institute is a major advocate for family planning to achieve environmental sustainability. Their new initiative, the Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment (FPESA) projects, seeks to establish the relationship.

Given the skewed questions guiding their inquiry — such as “Does recent peer-reviewed research affirm that family planning brings ecological benefits and thus is worth supporting by environmental leaders and others committed to sustainability?” — no doubt they will find an affirmative answer.

Structural Change is Essential

The emphasis on family planning as an environmental fix sidetracks us from making investments into infrastructure and health systems, like clean energy, food security or mass transit to support healthy communities and advance social justice. In consistently ignoring the biggest polluters, it keeps us from holding the worst of them accountable.

Instead, family planning is promoted as a technical fix for much more complex problems that require structural change. It’s thought to promote smaller family size, and many environmentalists like Uncrowded push for small families. On their website, you can sign on to their pledge to have one, or at most two, children, or to adopt instead. [20]

The organization believes “that we all have a moral obligation to protect the environment, and that we should consider the environment when choosing how many children to have.” [21]

They advocate incentive programs and laws that limit family sizes and regulate reproductive decisions for those whose moral compass might lead them to have more than two children. Uncrowded believes these measures are necessary to regulate those who do not meet their vague standards for quality parenting, which

include a “particular minimum of well-being and development.” [22].

The pledge to have one or two children is mild compared to GINK, which stands for “Green Inclinations, No Kids.” Subscribers to “GINK think” believe that having no children is the ultimate “green” act. Lisa Hymas, who created the label, says “the single most meaningful contribution I can make to a cleaner, greener world is to not have children.” [23]

GINK, a play on the Reagan-era yuppie label DINK (Dual Income, No Kids) is, like DINK, about personal wealth creation. Hymas emphasizes it as a benefit of having no children, as well as not having to contend with crumbs and toys. That wealth creation might lead to greater consumption on a household level, even if that household is “childfree,” is an issue she ignores.

An early subscriber to single-child families recently changed his mind. In his 1998 book *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families*, environmentalist Bill McKibben made a plea for small families, arguing that people in the United States should have fewer children (1.5 per woman), while reducing immigration rates in order to reduce environmental damage.

By 2013, McKibben had changed his stance on immigration and softened his emphasis on small families. His March 14, 2013 op-ed in the *LA Times* suggested that immigrants’ fertility was not the source of environmental destruction. Rather he called for immigration reform and stated “It will help, not hurt, our environmental efforts, and potentially in deep and powerful ways.”

He went on to say that individual households’ fertility choices are not at the heart of the problem: “one household at a time” scientists, policy wonks and economists have concluded it will also require structural change. We may need, for example, things such as a serious tax on carbon; that will require mustering political will to stand up to the fossil fuel industry.” [24]

Lessons of Population Control

Instead of resolving environmental problems, promotion of family planning to save the planet may well create or exacerbate problems in reproductive health and rights.

For one, it upholds family planning as a tool to achieve national and international goals like economic growth, environmental sustainability or national security.

At the same time, it points to women’s bodies as appropriate targets for intervention in the name of a greater good. The abuses of population control show what can happen when women’s health is second to other, more powerful, agendas.

Not that population control is a thing of the past. China’s one-child policy, while somewhat relaxed, still strictly regulates and restricts fertility, particularly in cities. [25]

In some states in India, two-child norms keep people with more than two children from sitting on local governing boards or from receiving government benefits. Romani women in Central Europe, and women living with HIV in parts of Africa and Latin America undergo forced and coerced sterilizations. A 2014 audit of California women’s prisons found that tubal ligations were performed for the purposes of sterilization, sometimes without the consent of the inmate.

As these examples show, the incentives and restrictive laws that *Uncrowded* suggests are necessary to curb population growth exist in some places, even though they run counter to international standards. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development’s Program of Action, or “consensus,” was endorsed by most of the world’s governments and came out against the use of coercion, incentives and disincentives in family planning provision.

In this context, endorsing population reduction as an environmental prerogative is a loaded choice. Most environmentalists, seeking to distance

themselves from population control by promoting the health and empowerment of women, advocate for providing contraception only for those who want but don’t currently have access to it. Family planning is thought to enable women to prevent pregnancy and reduce population growth: a boon to both women and the environment.

But family planning is not just about preventing pregnancy, and helping people to control their fertility does not ensure their sexual and reproductive health and rights. People have a range of needs, both to prevent pregnancy and to get pregnant, and to practice safer sex.

Sexual and reproductive health services should include access to a full range of contraception methods, and with instructions on use and potential adverse effects. They should include education on sexuality, healthy relationships and gender identity. They should provide HIV prevention and treatment, safe abortion, and child and maternal health services among others.

Narrowing family planning to pregnancy prevention unnecessarily restricts reproductive health and can have damaging consequences. For one thing, contraceptives are not fail-proof. People get pregnant even when using them and may require other services, like abortion or pre-natal care.

We need to advocate for a full range of services, particularly when anti-abortion and anti-contraception activists are pushing restrictive laws and policies in different parts of the world, including the United States.

When family planning overemphasizes pregnancy prevention over other issues, it too easily leaves out gay and transgender people and those who are not of reproductive age, who also need a range of services. Finally, overemphasis on pregnancy prevention can mean that other health considerations can rank as secondary.

A recent international campaign for the hormonal contraceptive Depo-Provera is an example. The medical non-profit PATH, the Gates Foundation, UNFPA, DfID and USAID are distributing the Sayana Press, an

injectible dispenser of Depo-Provera, in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal and Uganda. Their goal is to reach three million women.

Depo-Provera is associated with a number of adverse effects, including loss of bone density, prolonged and irregular bleeding, and depression. There is also compelling evidence that it nearly doubles the risk of HIV acquisition and transmission. The World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control recommend that women who use Depo-Provera should also use condoms as a precautionary measure.

In the midst of debate about the evidence about Depo and HIV “studies show mixed results” rollout of the Sayana Press is happening on a large scale, including areas like Uganda, with high HIV prevalence rates.

The Gates Foundation, a partner in

the Sayana Press and powerful donor in the international family planning establishment, believes that population growth is at the root of many social ills, including environmental degradation. The foundation’s strategy for family planning states that population growth will “put pressure on social services and resources, and contribute significantly to the global burden of disease, environmental degradation, poverty and conflict.” [26]

Towards Social Justice

We can and must address environmental problems, including climate change, while upholding social justice.

This means reforming the systems and institutions that perpetuate environmental degradation, while

fighting the vast global inequalities in wealth, health and prosperity. It means promoting comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights for all people, in the context of healthy families and communities.

To this end, we should follow feminist Giovanna Di Chiro’s suggestion of forming “living environmental and social justice movements” coalitions that are dynamically and simultaneously committed to environmental, climate and reproductive justice. [27]

Environmentalists who promote family planning do have one thing right “we should be working across movements and issues for greater strength and relevance. However, we must keep social justice at the heart of our work, and refuse to blame women’s fertility for environmental degradation.

[November/December 2014, ATC 173](#)

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

26 August 2014, by **Alan Thornett**

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 of 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 1°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 2°C, millions more people each year would be subjected to coastal flooding. In the event of a rise of 3.5°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 2°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 being 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 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 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 with mass 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 to 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.

August 2014

Debate on exit strategy: Hansen’s program is more than a carbon tax

17 May 2014, by Ian Angus

I entirely agree that Hansen's proposals are an important contribution to building a global movement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by radically reducing the use of fossil fuels, and I fully endorse Foster's discussion of Hansen's program. That's why, contrary to Ekeland's assertion that Climate & Capitalism has ignored the subject, we recommended Foster's article to C&C readers just days after it was published. Indeed, months before that C&C published a short article by Hansen [28] that argued for his fee and dividend plan. Obviously we could have done more, but Ekeland is simply wrong to say there has been "no discussion" of this in C&C.

It's good to have more attention drawn to this important issue, but unfortunately Ekeland reduces Hansen's program to just one element - fee and dividend - entirely omitting many essential components. He compounds that error by using fee and dividend as a starting point for defending carbon taxes in general.

These omissions and additions reflect a deep misunderstanding of Hansen's program. If it were as limited as Ekeland's article implies, it would have little relevance to ecosocialist organizing.

Fee and Dividend

Hansen calls his fee and dividend plan the "essential backbone" of his proposals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Under it, a substantial fee would be levied on all fossil fuels at the well head, mine shaft, or point of entry, and subsidies to the fossil fuel industry would be eliminated. The fee, which would increase in predictable steps over time, would be paid by fossil fuel companies, and each month every legal resident would receive an equal share of the money collected, as a direct bank deposit or debit card.

This would directly increase the price of fossil fuels as such, and indirectly increase prices for products and

services that use fossil fuels, but Hansen calculates that the poorest 60% of the U.S population, who generally have small carbon footprints, would receive more in dividends than they would pay in increased fuel and other prices.

The plan would be more transparent and easier to administer than other proposed schemes. If done properly, it would create an economic incentive for both corporations and consumers to reduce their carbon footprints by increasing energy efficiency and switching to alternatives.

Although Ekeland argues that the left should adopt the fee and dividend plan as the basis of a "common strategic campaign to mobilize people for an exit from fossil fuel society," he is peculiarly ambivalent about one of its central features, the 100% direct dividend distribution.

On one hand, he appears to accept Hansen's case for a direct dividend: "Climate' money each month going into poor people's bank accounts would unite the demand for income redistribution with working people's fundamental long-term environmental demand for a healthy planet." But elsewhere he contradicts himself by describing the plan as "adapted to the U.S. political context" and "completely individualistic," and suggesting that in other countries the money collected could be spent by government on social projects.

Such confusion is disturbing. Unlike every actual carbon tax plan proposed or implemented in the world today, Hansen's fee and dividend plan has a strong class component: it would take from rich corporations and give to the poor, creating a material incentive for working people to support the carbon fee and oppose corporate efforts to weaken it. If the money goes into government projects, no matter how worthy, it will be seen as just another attack on working class living standards, and how it is spent will be subject to the whims of capitalist politicians.

Is that all there is?

Anyone who reads only Ekeland's article would conclude that Hansen's "exit strategy" is just fee and dividend, nothing more. The readers who have commented that the plan is insufficient are judging Ekeland's presentation, not Hansen's, because, contrary to the impression Ekeland creates, fee and dividend is only one aspect of Hansen's exit strategy.

Other key measures in Hansen's program include:

Shutting down all coal-fired plants that lack carbon capture and storage capability. (That technology is not yet available.)

Stopping all production of non-conventional fossil fuels, including tar sands oil, shale oil and gas, and methane hydrates.

Active implementation of a wide range of carbon conservation policies.

A global transition in farming and forestry practices to implement carbon retention in the soil and global reforestation.

Development of so-called fourth-generation nuclear technology, with strict safety controls. (That technology is not yet available.)

Reducing non-CO2 climate forcings such as methane, ozone and black carbon.

Hansen is very clear that stopping coal and unconvensionals is the one measure without which all else will fail, but Ekeland doesn't mention that or any of the other measures Hansen proposes.

James Hansen being arrested at a protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, which he calls "the fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the planet," because it would carry tar sands crude.

James Hansen being arrested at a protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, which he calls "the fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the planet," because it would carry Alberta tar sands crude.

As Foster says, the policies Hansen

considers to be essential are shown not just by what he writes, but by his actions. "He has been arrested in an attempt to block coal-fired plants and in a protest over the Keystone XL pipeline designed to bring Alberta tar sands oil to the Gulf of Mexico. His activism, and willingness to be arrested in relation to these issues, shows what he considers to be essential. ... A mere increase in the carbon price is insufficient where coal and unconventional fossil fuels are concerned, and actual bans are necessary."

How does fee and dividend fit in? It's evident from his books and articles that Hansen sees it as a framework for high-level negotiations. He writes, "the key requirement is that the United States and China agree to apply across-the-board fees to carbon-based fuels." They would force others to follow suit by imposing import duties on products from countries that don't levy a carbon fee.

Given that approach, it's not surprising that Hansen's fee and dividend advocacy mainly involves lobbying politicians and governments, rather than grassroots action. That's why Foster, while recognizing its progressive features, says fee and dividend is "mostly a top-down, elite-based strategy."

And that's why fee and dividend can be part of a radical action program against climate change, but isn't sufficient by itself, and isn't suitable for building the mass movements that socialists know are needed.

All out for carbon taxes?

Ekeland believes that left's lack of enthusiasm for Hansen's plan reflects a "long tradition of quite correctly fighting against indirect, regressive and socially unjust taxes." I agree: most of the leftish criticisms of Hansen that I've seen have failed to see the broad range of measures that Hansen advocates, and the important ways in which fee and dividend differs from most carbon tax plans.

But having said that the left has "quite correctly" opposed such taxes, Ekeland promptly reverses himself, calling opposition to tax-driven price increases "a fairly dogmatic tradition." He strongly criticizes me, Simon Butler, Tim Anderson and Daniel Tanuro for pointing that in the real world - not some fantasy world where taxes are imposed by impartial governments for the common good - most plans to "put a price on carbon" hurt working people while boosting corporate profits.

Rather than discussing Hansen's full program, Ekeland uses one of its proposals as a jumping-off point to argue that using taxes and markets to influence consumer behavior is the only practical and effective way to reduce emissions. Leftists who disagree display "a lack of understanding of markets as a social institution." He points to the fact that sales of electric cars jumped in Norway when taxes on them were cut as proof that "when the prices and context change, behavior can change." By implication, the emission problem is caused by consumer behavior, and fixing the market is the solution.

The alternative, which he calls "command-and-control regulation," is

not only "totally unrealistic" but would likely lead to "black markets for energy, with horrific prices and speculation." No wonder he doesn't mention that Hansen's program features an outright ban on coal and unconventional fuel production!

This isn't the place for a full discussion of the advantages and (mostly) disadvantages of trying to use markets to solve environmental problems. The key point is made clearly in Foster's article: "All exclusively market-based strategies tend to backfire, since they rely principally on economic incentives. Hansen's fee and dividend is necessary under present conditions but is only a single wedge in what must be a much more comprehensive climate-change exit strategy."

Ekeland reduces Hansen's program to a single wedge, and his contradictory comments about direct dividends reveal confusion about key aspects of that. It is very difficult to see how his approach can be considered consistent with James Hansen's climate change exit strategy.

While I disagree with him on important issues, I greatly appreciate Anders Ekeland's initiative in opening a discussion on climate change exit strategy. Only through open and frank debate of these issues can we develop the action program that ecosocialists and other radical green activists need. I look forward to a thoughtful discussion in the Comments section below, and I'm sure Climate & Capitalism will publish further articles on this subject.

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James Hansen's 'exit strategy' from global warming

10 May 2014, by **Alan Thornett**

He is a long-time thorn in the side of successive US administrations on the issue and is famous for warning the US Congress about the dangers of global warming as long ago as 1988. He is also a militant climate activist and was arrested in a protest over the Keystone XL pipeline designed to transport Alberta tar sands to the Gulf of Mexico. More recently he has been prominent for raising the issue of an 'exit strategy' from fossil fuel dependency.

He first raised the issue of an exit strategy at a US congressional hearing in 2008 under the George W Bush administration. By 'exit strategy' he means a strategy that would achieve the required reduction in CO₂ emissions before the tipping point (or climate cliff) when global warming spirals out of human control. Climate science tells us that this is likely to happen when the global average temperature rises by somewhere between 1.5°C and 2°C over preindustrial levels. All current 'solutions' on offer, he argues, even the most radical, are flawed in that they fail to offer a credible means of implementation before such a situation is reached.

In 2009 Hansen made his exit strategy the main concluding action proposition of his most important book on global warming, *Storms of My Grandchildren*.

It was slow to make an impact on the environmental movement, however, until February 2013 when an article by John Bellamy Foster in *Monthly Review* entitled *James Hansen and the Climate Exits Strategy* gave it strong support. Foster is not uncritical of the proposal but he acknowledges the need for such a strategy and sees the central principle it advocated as an important starting point towards an effective exit approach.

Since his article was the proposal has been taken a bit more seriously on the left and the eco-left. There was an introduction on it at *Historical Materialism* last year (introduced by Anders Ekeland a member of the Norwegian Socialist Left Party). The International Socialist Organisation in the USA has discussed it (though without drawing conclusions) and

there has been some limited discussion on within the FI on it.

Hansen is not an anti-capitalist, of course, and he "cautiously" supports nuclear power as one of the 'alternatives' to fossil fuel "provided that the dangers of this form of energy can be substantially reduced". This is a big qualification, of course, since such technology does not exist. Despite this position on nuclear energy, however, he is militantly anti-establishment on global warming.

What motivates him is what he sees as a looming and potentially irreversible planetary crisis. Over the past 100 years the global average temperature has risen by around 0.8°C. Half of this, however, has been since 1980 and the rate of increase is accelerating. The current level of 400ppm carbon in the atmosphere came earlier than most had expected. When Hansen published *Storms of My Grandchildren*, in 2009, he predicted that 400ppm would be reached by 2025. It came 12 years earlier in 2013.

The arctic summer sea ice and Greenland and polar ice caps are retreating faster than previously estimated. This will cause sea levels to rise, threatening coastal regions and island communities throughout the globe. Extreme weather events (droughts, storms, floods) will be far more common. It is a very dangerous situation.

J B Foster puts it this way: "The world at present is fast approaching a climate cliff. Science tells us that an increase in global average temperature of 2°C (3.6°F) constitutes the planetary tipping point with respect to climate change, leading to irreversible changes beyond human control. A 2°C rise is sufficient to melt a significant portion of the world's ice due to feedbacks that will hasten the melting. It will thus set the course to an ice-free world. Sea level will rise. Numerous islands will be threatened along with coastal regions throughout the globe. Extreme weather events (droughts, storms, floods) will be far more common. The paleoclimatic record shows that an increase in global average temperature of several

degrees means that 50 percent or more of all species "plants and animals" will be driven to extinction. Global food crops will be negatively affected."

Hansen argues that simply slowing down the rate of carbon emissions is far from enough. That if the climate cliff is to be avoided the rising carbon content of the atmosphere does not just have to be halted but it has to be reversed and taken back to 350ppm by the end of the century. That is the explicit message, he argues, that science provides. We have to accept that the only safe thing to do with fossil fuels is to leave them in the ground "starting with coal, which is the dirtiest.

At the moment fossil fuels are the cheapest form of energy, partly because of their energy density but also because the price of them does not take into account their full cost to society.

This implies is that an exit strategy from fossil fuel based energy is necessary within a few decades if disaster is to be averted. The question is what kind of exit strategy will bring such a thing about? That is the question that Hansen is addressing.

Up to now all attempts to halt the rise in CO₂ emissions, including the Kyoto Protocol and subsequent climate negotiations, have failed miserably "particularly with those countries most responsible for climate change. In fact emissions have continue to rise in every part of the world. Current measures, usually based on cap and trade or other market mechanisms, have not only been to ineffective they have been used as a cynical cover for doing nothing since they would not resolve the problem even if implemented. Many governments have used the economic crisis to reverse even the meagre measures they had already taken.

There is not, Hansen accepts, a silver bullet that will halt global warming. But there is an urgent need for a big impact idea, which, in conjunction with other measures, most crucially a massive transformation of the energy infrastructure to renewables, that

would tackle the problem in the timescale available.

He rejects cap-and-trade as a useless con and advocates instead what he calls a fee-and-dividend system to facilitate the transition to a carbon free economy. His proposal is to make CO2 emissions prohibitively expensive whilst fully compensating the majority of the population, by definition the poorest sections of society, for the effects of the increases.

This would be achieved by placing a uniform fee (or a tax) on the fossil fuel companies for each ton of carbon they produce at source – i.e. at the pithead, the wellhead or at the port of entry. The result would be to increase the price of goods in the shops that had been manufactured and/or transported by fossil fuel along with fossil fuel used for domestic purposes. The fee would start low and increase annually until renewable energy is competitive with fossil fuel.

Under the dividend part of the scheme the total amount of money collected each month from the fees would be divided evenly between all adult residents of the country with half shares for children up to two children per family – though restricting this to two children is in my view problematic. Those who reduced their carbon footprint the most would benefit the most. They will be motivated to save as much of their dividend payment as possible rather than spending it on increasingly expensive fossil fuels. They can do this by changing over to energy efficient lighting and appliances, upgrading their insulation and replacing energy inefficient boilers and by switching to green energy sources. Equally with businesses the incentive would be to become more energy efficient and convert to green energy, otherwise they would become uncompetitive.

The dividend would be transferred directly into each person's bank account or onto an electronic card if they do not have a bank account. Hansen gives the following example of how it would work:

"As an example. Consider the point in time at which the fee will reach the level of \$115 per ton on carbon

dioxide. A fee of that level will increase the cost of Gasoline by \$1 per gallon and the average cost of electricity by around 8 cents per kilowatt-hour. Given the amount of oil, gas, and coal sold in the US in 2007, \$115 per ton will yield \$670bn. The resulting dividend will be close to \$3,000 per year, or \$250 per month for each adult resident. A family with two or more children would receive in the range of \$8,000 to 9,000 per year."

Some 60 percent of the population would receive net economic benefits from this: i.e., the dividends they received back would exceed the increased prices paid – and these net benefits would increase if they were to reduce their carbon footprints further. And since this is a fee imposed on fossil-fuels companies, who are among the biggest users of fossil fuels, it would give them the incentive to develop alternative energy sources and keep the fossil fuels in the ground."

It would, Hansen argues, be a form of progressive taxation since those with the most expensive lifestyles will pay out a lot more than the \$9,000 they will get back in dividend. He calculates that the results of the scheme should be that the 40% of richer people should end up paying more whilst the 60% would directly benefit. Low-income people can gain by limiting their emissions, he argues. "People with multiple houses, or who fly around the world a lot, will pay more in increased prices than they obtain in the dividend".

He says that he prefers this system because he does not trust governments to do it through taxation because they are not only politically suspect but they are "virtually arms of the fossil fuel industry" – and in any case not everyone is on a pay role. If the fees are distributed directly to the public, he argues, people will be prepared to allow them to rise to high and effective levels unlike the ineffective cap and trade schemes.

Economic modeling for the US Hansen argues: "shows that [even] a mere \$10 per ton CO2 fee, rising by \$10 each year, would reduce emissions by 30 percent after a decade" – more than a

factor of 10 greater than the oil carried by the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, rendering that pipeline superfluous".

J B Forster argues that: "The advantage of Hansen's fee and dividend scheme from a climate change standpoint is that it is directly aimed at making the fossil-fuel companies – those who take the fossil fuels out of the ground – pay, while increasing the price of carbon to decrease consumption in every nook and cranny of the economy. It also makes it possible to raise carbon prices to the extent required for a rapid phase out of fossil fuels, while garnering the necessary mass support. "The public will only allow an adequate rising price on carbon," he contends, "if the system is simple and transparent with the proceeds distributed to the public".

A fee and dividend scheme would also, Hansen insists, have to go alongside a wide range of mitigation and conservation measures including reusing, recycling, rationing, energy reduction and retention measures and global changes in farming and forestry practice to reduce the amount of chemicals used and to enhance carbon retention and storage in the soil.

It would be very difficult to persuade governments, even relatively progressive ones to implement such a scheme of course – and Hansen has been lobbying some of them on it. And it would not be fully effective until all governments adopted it, though he argues for individual governments to adopt it as an example. But there are no easy solutions on offer. Any proposal capable of tackling the problem would be just as difficult to implement not only because governments would be just as reluctant to do so but because it would require changes in the way people live – and would require popular consent.

This is the strength of Hansen's proposal. 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 guaranteed progressive/redistributive content. 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".

This is very important. We can all spell out what needs to be done. We need a complete change over to renewable energy, an end to productivism, a huge programme of energy conservation, an integrated transport policy and a big reduction in the use of the car, the localisation of food (and other) production where possible, land reform, water conservation, food sovereignty, a big reduction in meat consumption, the protection of habitats and 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 for their introduction.

We also have to consider why much of the left is so cautious towards Hansen's proposal, particularly when it does not have an effective exit strategy of its own.

Some, no doubt, are not convinced of the urgency—the tipping point or climate cliff. But many of those who are remain reluctant to endorse his proposal.

One entirely valid reason is that any real reduction in fossil fuel consumption means that almost everything becomes more expensive—it is therefore an anti-working class proposal unless there is an effective and socially just means of compensation. In other words carbon taxes can hit the poorest people in society if they are framed in the wrong way (as with emissions trading schemes for example) or if such inequality is not properly redressed in the totality of the measures taken.

There is a long held opposition amongst many on the left that carbon taxes—or the taxation of pollution as I would call it—is wrong. Carbon taxes don't have to be framed in a regressive way. They can be framed in

an entirely progressive way—as is the case with Hansen's proposals—and in such cases we should support them.

In any case we have to be careful, since being critical of everything can mean that you have no alternative strategy and you end up with business as usual. In any case there are major and important carbon taxes in existence—for example taxes of petrol and diesel—which as far as I am aware no one on the left is demanding are abolished. Aviation fuel is free from tax, of course, and most environmentalists rightly demand that this scandalous concession is withdrawn.

Another reason is that Hansen's proposals are designed to function under capitalism, whilst it still exists. This is problematic for those on the left who hold the view that little can be done whilst capitalism exists—given the nature of the system and the drive for profit—and that the answer is a socialist (or indeed an eco-socialist) society. The problem with this, to put it crudely, is that we do not appear to be on the verge of world revolution and therefore when it eventually comes it may be too late to do very much.

J B Foster also makes a concession to this towards the end of his article when he says: Hansen's climate-change exit strategy represents what is clearly a calculated attempt to push through the maximum plan that the regime of capital could conceivably accept, and the minimum necessary to avoid complete disaster. It represents a heroic effort to promote the formation of political-economic conditions that will prevent the world from crossing a catastrophic climate tipping point.

He goes on to say that it does not "address the question of capitalism and the accumulation imperative that drives such a system, which has obvious implications for any long-term strategy of climate or environmental stabilization".

I am not sure, however, that it is true that Hansen's proposal is not

objectively a challenge to capitalism since it calls for the system to be run in a completely different way. In fact Foster himself appears to recognise this at the end of the article arguing that it is objectively revolutionary:

"What is objectively revolutionary in Hansen's proposal is its root in a shared sense of emergency and crisis that can be readily communicated at the center of the system in the monopoly-finance capital economies themselves. The greatest potential of Hansen's steadily increasing carbon fee and dividend is that its results would reverberate in every aspect of the society and economy. It would make clear as never before at the level of everyday life the class nature of carbon footprints and the increasing destruction of the planet as a place of human habitation. And it would soon be evident that the radical kinds of changes that would need to be introduced into the whole constellation of production, distribution, and consumption relations could not be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production."

I strongly agree with that assessment. J B Foster, in my view, has made an important contribution to the struggle against climate change by bringing Hansen's proposal to the attention of the left. Hopefully Hansen's proposal will be taken a lot more seriously as the discussion develops. It is not the finished product as far as an exit strategy is concerned but it is a much-needed big idea with a potentially big impact on the debate and is a good start that should be built on. If the left is going to play a role in that it has to be able to shake off some of the misconceptions of the past.

May 5th 2014

A Fossil Fuel Exit Program

10 May 2014, by **Anders Ekeland**

"Given that it is cumulative carbon emissions that matter, the goal has to be to keep fossil fuels in the ground, not simply to slow their use as in most current strategies.

"A complete transition away from fossil fuels is necessary within a few decades. The question is how to construct an exit strategy that will accomplish this. It is Hansen who has provided the starting point for a realistic climate-change exit strategy aimed at keeping the increase in global average temperatures well below 2°C." [29]

But why haven't the left, the hard left and ecosocialists in particular, backed this realistic strategy for a climate change exit strategy? Before discussing this key question, a brief presentation of Hansen's "fee and dividend" proposal is necessary. The main points, as Foster summarizes Hansen's proposal, are: [30]

• Fossil-fuel companies would be charged an easily implemented carbon fee imposed at the well head, mine shaft, or point of entry.

• 100% of the revenue collected would be distributed monthly to the population on a per capita basis as dividends, with up to two half shares for children per family.

• Dividends would be sent directly via electronic transfers to bank accounts or debit cards.

• The carbon fee would be a single, uniform amount in the form of dollars per ton of carbon dioxide emitted from the fuel.

• The carbon fee would then gradually and predictably be ramped up so as to achieve the necessary carbon reductions.

• At the same time current subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry would be eliminated.

What would be the economic consequences of such a "fee and dividend" system? Building on Hansen, Foster suggests that the adoption in the United States of a fossil-fuel carbon fee of \$115 for every ton of carbon dioxide emitted from fossil fuel is equivalent to a \$1 increase per gallon of gasoline, or about eight cents per kilowatt hour in electricity charges, generating \$670 billion in dividends.

Each adult legal resident would receive one share equal to \$3,000 a year. A family with two children would receive around \$9,000 a year, with \$750 a month deposited into its bank account.

Some 60% of the population would receive net economic benefits, i.e. the dividends they received back would exceed the increased prices paid. These net benefits would of course increase if they were to further reduce their carbon footprints.

Hansen's plan crucially insists that all of the revenue from the carbon fee go straight to the public rather than to governmental agencies, which he considers "virtual arms of the fossil fuel industry." He points out:

Low-income people can gain by limiting their emissions. People with multiple houses, or who fly around the world a lot, will pay more in increased prices than they obtain in the dividend. Further, if the funds are distributed 100% to the public, the public will allow the fee to rise to high levels, in contrast to the relatively ineffectual carbon price characterizing cap-and-trade or a pure carbon tax. [31]

In 2007 the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the carbon footprint of the top 20% of the U.S. economy was more than three times that of the bottom 20%. [32] The Carbon Tax Center reported in 2005

that the top 20% accounted for 32% of total gasoline consumption in the United States, the bottom 20% for only 9%. [33]

Democratic Redistribution

For socialists there are several aspects of Hansen's fee and dividend system that need further discussion. It is clearly a proposal adapted to the U.S. political context. For example, its redistribution scheme is completely individualistic since every citizen would directly receive 100% of the refund.

In other parts of the world – e.g. in the Scandinavian context where people are less skeptical of "big government" – it might be just as easy to mobilize for collective social solutions. These might be improvements in public urban transport and/or high speed trains, to build bike lanes, subsidize solar roofs and private windmills, etc.

Shi-Ling-Hsu points out in his book *The Case for a Carbon Tax* that "it is not clear that voters even want the money back." Indeed even "the conservative Albertans expressed a preference for funding public school infrastructure and health care delivery." (102) But the principle of a socially just redistribution would still apply – in different ways in different political contexts.

It is important to have to have the broadest possible democracy in deciding the actual redistribution. Other issues that will need to be discussed by the mass movements are the speed of the tax increase and the international dimensions of the tax. But the context for these discussions is the core of Hansen's proposal – to make fossil fuel so expensive that renewable energy will prevail in a

socially just way.

But what has been worrying this author for at least a decade is the resistance on the left, including the ecosocialist left, to almost any use of taxes “or in principle, democratically managed prices” to solve social and environmental problems. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the fundamental reason why this is so, but it is rooted in a non-materialist “and I would argue “non-Marxian understanding of the role of prices and markets in society.

One must remember that markets have been around, under very different modes of production, for a long time. Consequently markets and prices as mechanisms to coordinate societies that have reached a certain level of division of labor cannot be “prohibited,” but must be replaced by superior mechanisms.

The social conditions for the withering away of markets will come under mature socialism, characterized by relative abundance of energy, goods and services. In the coming decades, where we hopefully make the transition from fossil to renewable energy, we will be far from relative abundance.

I also think this is, on a more theoretical level, linked to the dominance of the “Leninist” tradition “in a negative sense, as a fairly dogmatic tradition “on the hard left. Personally I became aware of this stubborn resistance to the use of prices in relation to (then London mayor) Ken Livingstone’s proposal in 2002 for a congestion charge (a fee for driving in peak hours in the heart of the city “ed.).

The congestion charge as Livingstone originally proposed it was far from ideal. Rather than posing a clear objective of reducing emissions, the proposal presented congestion as the main problem.

The charge was also regressive “as any flat tax on necessities is by definition “although the relatively rapid and huge investment in public transport, especially in buses, would have benefited ordinary people. The British left (in its majority) was

fairly critical. It instinctively had a negative attitude toward using a charge to regulate behavior. Worse, it had no real alternative solution to reducing either congestion or emissions. Yet today, as the congestion charge has produced some real results, the British left is still ambivalent about its use.

The effect of the congestion charge significantly reduced congestion but had less effect on emissions. The rules were changed after some years to “punish” high-emitting vehicles.

The congestion charge became so popular that the Conservatives did not dare to abolish it “only parts of it “and the left is no longer opposing it. However it is not advocating any improvements or alternative strategy as far as this author knows. This equals political sterility, with the left having nothing substantial to offer on two major issues in people’s lives, congestion and emissions.

To my knowledge the left in other countries, including Norway, has been generally skeptical of congestion charges and, given its dislike of regressive taxes, has not taken the lead in addressing the issue. With today’s technology, however, in principle there’s no problem in making a congestion charge itself progressive. In Norway, since the income and fortune of the car’s owner is known, the charge could be set proportionally higher for rich car owners, and in addition comes the advantages of a socially just redistribution of the revenue.

From the early ‘90s the left’s primary objective has been to gain support for the fact that there is man-made climate change, that “something must be done,” and that emission trading is clearly no solution. In fact emission trading was constructed to maintain business as usual, to avoid the social conflict that would and will arise from a transition from fossil energy toward a society based on renewables.

The overriding objective of the environmental movement and the hard left was to convince ourselves and the public that climate change was human-caused (“anthropogenic”), and to put popular pressure on the

international climate negotiations to force the ruling elites to at least take some minimal action for reduction of the emissions.

But as the stalemate of the international climate negotiations became clear, as the IPCC delivered more and more alarming reports, it was high time for the left to come forward with its own solutions, its own exit strategy.

The Reception of Hansen’s Proposal

The disappointment after the very high expectations of the Copenhagen meeting in December 2009 marked a turning point. The futility of the negotiations became more and more obvious for each subsequent meeting. That the NGOs, unions and social movement forces walked out of the recent Warsaw meeting is a clear sign that the elites’ mechanism for emission reductions has lost legitimacy.

This means that a political space has opened for the left. But while there are many excellent analyzes of the relationship between Marx(ism) and ecology, the impossibility of green capitalism and the total failure of emission trading schemes, there is no common strategic campaign to mobilize people for an exit from fossil fuel society.

The fundamental reason is that any set of policies that would reduce the use of fossil fuels significantly will lead to a general price rise “in real terms “that will hit the working class. The poorer one is, the harder the price rise hits. The left has a long tradition of quite correctly fighting against indirect, regressive and socially unjust taxes.

Let’s now look in more detail at the reception of Hansen’s proposal from the ecosocialist left. One of the most influential websites in ecosocialist circles is “Climate and Capitalism” <http://climateandcapitalism.com>, an excellent online journal with relevant and interesting articles. But to my knowledge there has been no discussion [34] of Hansen’s proposal, despite the fact that “Climate and

Capitalism” shares with Hansen a fundamental critique of emission trading and of regressive carbon taxes.

Emissions trading is “as Hansen points out “actually “cap and tax,” since firms will load the quota price on to consumers as a cost of production like any other cost. “Climate and Capitalism” posted an article by Simon Butler, “Pricing carbon: A failed strategy that won’t save the climate” [35](8) that argues against emissions trading systems, and asks:

“So if we should say ‘no’ to a price on carbon, what should we say ‘yes’ to? Of course, we must continue our campaigns to end fossil fuel subsidies, keep fossil fuels in the ground, leave forests in the soil and roll out renewable energy, public transport, sustainable farming and other climate-proof infrastructure. We’d also do well to have a clear national campaign focus. An Australia-wide campaign to build publicly-owned big solar thermal power plants, starting with Port Augusta, would be a good choice. Unlike carbon trading, big solar power is tangible, enjoys wide public support and is exactly what we need. [...] Our goal must be to force governments to treat coal, oil and gas in the same way they now treat asbestos: as a deadly threat to public health that requires strict public regulation. Indeed, fossil fuels are far, far more deadly than asbestos when you add up the consequences of runaway climate change.”

But I think the author should have asked himself if ending subsidies is not equal to setting a higher price on carbon, even more so if we could manage to keep a significant part of the fossil fuels in the ground. Not only would the carbon price rise, but the demand for renewable energy and would rise along with its price. This would happen in a dramatic way, of course, if carbon, like asbestos, were practically banned.

Of course big solar power is more tangible, but without a planned rise of the carbon price it might never become cheaper than fossil fuels “and that is what’s really needed. In countries with a substantial amount of renewable energy, like hydro-electric

power in Norway, wind and solar in Denmark and Germany, the renewable energy is mostly coming in addition to fossil fuels because fossil fuels are still much cheaper.

In an article about the carbon tax in British Columbia, Ian Angus, the editor of “Climate and Capitalism,” writes [36](9):

“British Columbia’s unique carbon tax on gasoline and other fuels went up another 1.1 cents a liter Sunday, but it remains an expensive, ineffective and unpopular failure.

“While the BC Liberal government is attempting to make the proverbial silk purse from a sow’s ear, the reality is that North America’s only carbon tax is not reducing vehicle fuel consumption. Nor is it helping improve the environment, since every cent of the \$1.17 billion in tax revenue raised this year goes to corporate and personal tax cuts “not to fund a single environmentally-friendly program like public transit, energy efficiency or conservation.”

First of all, 1.1 cents per liter (roughly four cents a gallon “ed.) is not very dramatic. It is quite obvious that in order to change the type of energy used for transport, prices must rise significantly “and steadily. And shouldn’t the left campaign for a redistribution scheme “be it “collective” spending on public services or a progressive “individualistic” redistribution a la Hansen?

In another article, “Green Illusions and the Carbon Tax Scam,” [37](10) Tim Anderson writes:

“The problems with this line of logic should be obvious. The demand for carbon-dirty industries is mostly ‘price inelastic’ and so the higher costs will be accepted, and passed on to consumers without technological change. Australia has had very high taxes on petrol since the late 1970s, with no real impact on fuel consumption. Second, there is no guarantee that revenue from a carbon tax will be used to invest in renewable energies; indeed the more recent debate has degenerated into one where most revenue is said to be used in ‘compensation’ for affected industries and consumers. While

potentially worthy in the sense of tax equity, ‘compensation’ negates the supposed behavioral impact of higher carbon prices...”

Again I find the analysis superficial. The high taxes on petrol in Australia, as in Norway, did not have the objective of reducing fuel consumption; they were mostly pure revenue raising, maybe with a little bit of energy efficiency. As everybody knows, the internal combustion engine was significantly improved as a result of the 1973 OPEC price “shock.”

The redistribution of tax revenue somewhat weakens the “substitution” effect. But if driving a petrol car became significantly more expensive than driving a car with “green” electricity (for example, charged from solar panels on your own roof or in your garden), there would clearly be a positive result.

In Norway electric cars are exempt from some taxes, and are allowed to use the bus-only lanes. This has made them a huge success. So when the prices and the context change, behavior can change. [38]

Social Impossibility of a Carbon Tax?

Daniel Tanuro, a well-known ecosocialist, member of the Belgian section of the Fourth International and author of the book *Green Capitalism – why it can’t work*, [39] has a series of other arguments against a carbon tax, the essence being:

“In fact, the scope of the reductions to be achieved, given the urgency and the size of the difference in cost between fossils and renewables, is such that even a tax of \$600 a ton would not suffice (it would simply allow a reduction in global emissions by one-half by 2050, according to the International Energy Agency)...employers could accept this only if it were wholly transferred to the ultimate consumers, while the majority of the population, infuriated by the austerity that has prevailed for 30 years, will obviously oppose any such deterioration in its conditions of

existence.

"That is why, in practice, and notwithstanding all sophisticated theories of ecological economics, the policy proposals for internalization of the costs of pollution are both ecologically insufficient and socially unsustainable." [40](13)

Tanuro does not even mention the possible redistribution of the carbon tax revenue, although it is quite obvious that if there is a progressive and just distribution of the carbon tax income, it might very well be not only socially sustainable, but socially desirable, for ordinary people. But the brute fact is that any significant reduction of the consumption of cheap fossil fuels will raise prices on renewable energy and on most other goods and services as well to what Tanuro considers "socially unsustainable" levels. So the crucial question remains: If a redistributed carbon tax won't work, then what will?

Tanuro's answer, as from the rest of the left, is vague generalities about public plans for green technologies, and in his case a rather schizophrenic urge on the one hand for the iron necessity of reduced consumption, and on the other hand a plea for free basic goods:

"We cannot hide the fact that the socialist transformation will very probably involve renouncing certain goods, services and habits that profoundly influence the daily life of broad layers of the population, at least in the developed capitalist countries. The task, then, is to advocate objectives capable of compensating this loss by a substantial advance in the quality of life. In our view, the priority should be given to the pursuit of two such objectives: (1) gratuity of basic goods (water, energy, mobility) up to an average social volume (which implies the extension of the public sector); (2) a radical reduction (50%) in working time, without loss of salary, with proportional hiring and a decrease in the pace of work."

As I argued above, there is a lack of understanding of markets as a social institution, so the emergence of spontaneous "black market" reaction to command-and-control regulation is

not a part of the discussion. What happens when working people have to "renounce certain goods" on the one hand but get a certain amount of energy for free? Most probably there would be "black markets" for energy, with horrific prices and speculation. Is not that the lesson we have learned from the experiences of War Communism (the civil war period in Russia following the 1917 revolution ed.), from rationing in wartime?

Besides being totally unrealistic, this is certainly not a vision of the future that people will march in the streets to achieve. Obviously regulation and/or rationing are ways of internalizing the fact that society must use dramatically less fossil fuel, a fact that will be reflected in rising prices on fossil fuel (and indirectly on most other products). Is this way of internalizing the phaseout of fossil fuel more socially acceptable than a carbon tax with a socially just redistribution of the revenue?

Another far left group, the International Socialist Organization, did discuss Hansen's fee and dividend proposal. An online article titled "What's in the climate change bill" [41] gives a fair and informative description of Senators Barbara Boxer and Bernie Sanders' proposal, and is correctly critical of the fact that only 60% of the revenue gets redistributed, not 100% as in Hansen's fee and dividend proposal.

The article quotes John Bellamy Foster's statement that Hansen's proposal is a "starting point for a realistic climate-change exit strategy" and then quotes Foster's critical remarks to Hansen's proposal (see below). But it is unclear whether the ISO endorses Hansen's proposal as a starting point for the massive mobilization that everybody knows is necessary if something is going to happen? I would say that the reader is left rather confused, as the article's conclusion simply repeats the need for mass action:

"Only when we lose respect for those willing to destroy the planet and build a radical environmental movement, with the working class at its heart, will we be able to stop fracking, stop strangling the earth with pipelines, save the planet, dump the oil

companies and build a new world based on solidarity and sustainability."

But to build a movement, you need a concrete strategy, demands, something that will get working-class people to join the ranks of environmental activists. To correctly stress the need for mass action as does Hansen himself does not solve the far left's lack of a clear exit strategy and program for creating those necessary mobilizations. Challenging Capitalism Concretely or Abstractly?

The Socialist Worker article quotes John Bellamy Foster's critical comments about Hansen's proposal:

"All of this suggests, however, that the Hansen exit strategy for all of its strengths is itself insufficient. Its weakness is that it does not go far enough in addressing the social-systemic contradictions generated by the power structure of today's monopoly-finance capital. What is needed under present circumstances is an acceleration of history involving a reconstitution of society. The kinds of changes to be considered in the context of a planetary emergency cannot be confined within the narrow channels that the ruling class and its political power elite will accept. Rather an effective climate-change exit strategy must rely on the much larger social transformation that can only be unleashed by means of mass-democratic mobilization."

In my opinion Foster has done an important job by bringing Hansen's proposal to the attention of the hard left, but he relapses into that general mantra that "system change" is a prerequisite. History has provided a clear lesson on this point: People act to achieve much more concrete objectives like land reform, peace, tolerable living conditions, and ending national oppression and racism not system change as such.

That's why the left really needs to get into the discussion of an exit strategy and like Foster, I think that Hansen's fee and dividend proposal is the best starting point. "Climate" money each month going into poor people's bank accounts would unite the demand for income redistribution

with working people's fundamental
longterm environmental demand for a

healthy planet.

Against the Current

Population and the environment: time for a rethink

10 June 2013, by **Alan Thornett**

An ecosocialist conference took place in New York recently that attracted socialists from across North America. It brought together organisations sympathetic to the FI, along with the ISO, the Green Party and a large number of individual activists. The FI declared itself ecosocialist at its last World Congress and its sections are increasingly taking the ecological struggle up.

There is, however, one important aspect of the environmental crisis that the bulk of the left remains remarkably reluctant to confront. This is the issue of the human population of the planet—which is rising at an unsustainable rate.

Yet the issue of population is increasingly reflected in the media. In Britain the issue has been taken up in TV debates recently and Al Gore takes it up in his new book *The Future*—though not from an anti-capitalist standpoint of course.

As far as the urgency of the issue is concerned the figures are clear enough. 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 between 70 and 80 million people every year—or like adding the population of the USA to the planet every four years! And it shows no signs of slowing down. In fact the rate of increase has been remarkably stable for the past 50 years.

According to UN estimates the global population will reach somewhere between 8 and 11 billion by mid-century. Meanwhile nearly half of the current global population is under 25.

This is the biggest new generation ever, and a huge potential for further growth. At the same time the per capita consumption of food, water, and manufactured goods is increasing even faster than the population itself.

Yet the left has little to say about all this! There has been a consensus since the 1970s to oppose population control and coercive methods to reduce the birth rate, which has been correct. But opposition to coercive measures is not enough. It does not address the issue of rising population itself, or develop a progressive response to it—it is just against coercion.

This has been compounded by the way the debate (such as there has been) on population has been conducted. For many years allegations of Malthusianism have been dredged up whenever it has been argued that population is a problem to be discussed and addressed by the left. This is guilt by association and it has made population into a taboo subject. Malthus, of course, was the 19th century economist and cleric who famously advocated starving the poor to keep the population down because he thought it would outstrip food supply.

As a result of this kind of demonisation the vast majority of the left have avoided the subject, finding it an uncomfortable issue to address. This has been the case despite the fact that everyone on the left (as far as I am aware) regards the ideas of Malthus as rubbish from a bygone age.

This approach was reinforced by the

publication of *Too Many People?* (by Ian Angus and Simon Butler) in 20011, which I reviewed on the [Socialist Resistance website](#) in January 2012. This book, in my view, reinforced this whole approach and left the debate stuck in the past. Ian Angus and Simon Butler have distinguished records as environmentalists and as ecosocialists, but in my view, they are wrong on this issue.

The implication seems to be that to regard rising population as a problem is to be in some way anti-people, or a part of a reactionary, right wing, agenda. This has not only distorted the debate but it has given the real reactionaries, including the neo-Malthusians, who certainly exist, and have a very reactionary, authoritarian, agenda, stretching from the Chinese one child policy to forced sterilisation, a free hand.

This approach was strongly challenged as long ago as 1983 by the Canadian Marxist Wally Seccombe in his article "[Marxism and Demography](#)"—in *New Left Review* (1/137). He argued that constant references to Malthus had "placed the debate on population beyond the pale of legitimate scrutiny and investigation", and that in doing so Marxists abandoned the terrain to our enemies.

Wally Seccombe was right. But discussion, on population, on the left, has remained sparse to non-existent. And when it is discussed it is more likely to be focussed around whether to do so creates slippery slope to Malthusianism—rather than about the substance of the issue itself or a solution to the problem.

It is an approach that usually ends up minimising the issue itself in order to sustain its own stance. It goes alongside the view that rising population is no real problem. That it is largely irrelevant to the ecology of the planet. That population levels will eventually stabilise by natural processes. That the demands on resources generated by rising population can be met by technological "advances". That the damage inflicted on the environment can be reversed if enough money, and resources, are thrown at it.

Such assertions are, in my view, not only wrong but they are a dangerously complacent approach to the ecological crisis facing the planet.

Many of those invoking Malthus in this debate "like the authors of *Too Many People?* for example" also insist on branding those like myself, who see rising population as a problem to be addressed but who oppose any and all forms of population control or coercion, as "population controllers". They lump us together, in a completely unacceptable way, with the actual population control lobby.

All this needs to change. The issue of population, we have to insist, is a very important and wholly legitimate issue for the left to discuss. Human beings are a part of nature and have both a need and an obligation to live in harmony with it. We share with other species an extremely fragile and interrelated biosphere. As ecosocialists should look towards a society in which humankind can exist alongside other species without threatening their very existence.

Such an approach, in my view, is not anti-people but entirely pro-people. It is not a reactionary agenda but a wholly progressive one.

Is today's population growth sustainable?

Great store is put on the claim (as mentioned above) that the global population might stabilise by the end of the century "i.e. in 80 or 90 years

time! This, however, is far from certain. Population predictions are notoriously difficult to get right because the economic and social conditions that underlie them are themselves changing and unpredictable" particularly over such a long period of time.

It is true that today's rising population is mainly due to a big fall in the global death rate (particularly infant mortality) and an increase in life expectancy (mainly in the Global North) rather than by the birth rate, which has fallen. This does not, however, make the current rate of increase any more sustainable or the issue any less urgent. The UN itself says that: "despite recent declines in birth rates in many countries, further large increases in population size are inevitable."

The problem is that the resources of the planet are finite and they are running out! The demand for water is set to increase dramatically, both from rising population and rising expectations. Yet ground water aquifers "many of which only regenerate at a rate of 0.5% per 500 years" are being depleted. This has accelerated in recent years with pressure from emergent economies such as China and India and from new drilling and pumping technology.

Over 25% of all river water is now extracted before it reaches the ocean. Many rivers dry up before they get there. One in six people on the planet get their drinking water from glaciers and snowpack, on the world's mountain ranges, which are receding. These do not regenerate and when they are gone they are gone.

Land and topsoil are finite as are the resources of the oceans "which are being depleted at an alarming rate. Stocks of every species of fully-grown wild fish have shrunk by 90% in the last 50 years. Many of the mineral resources on which industrial production, medicines, transport, and communications depend are finite and are running out.

The most important resource under threat, however, is the planet's biodiversity. In the last fifty years human beings "by far the most

destructive species the planet has seen" have had a greater impact on the earth's ecosystems than in any period in history. We are now losing species a thousand times faster than the average loss during the preceding 65 million years "and once a species is gone it is gone. This is the biggest mass extinction of species since the demise of the dinosaurs.

All this is due to pollution, deforestation, the over-exploitation of natural resources, and habitat loss caused by human activity. Global warming, from fossil fuels, is destroying habitats and is altering the timing of animal migrations and plant flowerings. Many species are being pushed towards the polar regions and towards higher altitudes.

Recently in Britain 25 wildlife organisation published a major biodiversity audit entitled *The State of Nature Report*. This finds that of more than 6,000 species studied more than one in ten are thought to be under threat of extinction.

The capacity of the planet to absorb waste is also finite "something Al Gore also points out in *The Future*. He quotes the World Bank in saying that the per capita production of garbage alone from urban residents in the world is now 2.6 pounds per person per day, and is projected to increase rapidly. When you add to this is the waste produced by energy production, the making of chemicals, manufacturing, paper production and agricultural waste the volume is enormous. In fact the volume of waste created every day weighs more than the 7bn inhabitants of the planet!

I am not arguing that rising population is the root cause of the ecological crisis and global warming. That is the capitalist system of production and the commodification of the planet "although pre-capitalist systems of agriculture were already degrading the ecology and the biodiversity before capitalism arrived. What I am arguing is that rising population is a major contributory factor.

Nor am I arguing that the stabilisation of the global population, would, in itself, resolve the ecological crisis or

halt global warming. It would not. Such things will need a wide range of ecological, economic and social measures if they are to be achievedâ€”I won't list them here. The chances of success, however, in these objectives, would be better if the global population was stabilised rather than if it continued to rise. It would be easier to provide food, fresh water, energy, and waste disposal and protect the planet's bio-diversity with a population of 8 rather than 9 or 10 billion people.

What about food?

It is argued that enough food is produced today to feed the 7bn inhabitants of the planet if it was efficiently and equitably distributed and not subject to the ravages of the market with its hugely wasteful distribution systems. Whilst there is some truth in this the distribution of vast quantities of food across the globe, in a sustainable way, is extremely problematic.

It is true that past predictions that population would outstrip food supply have turned out to be wide of the mark. This was not only Malthus in the early 19th century but by Paul Ehrlich (in *The Population Bomb*) in the late 1960s. It would be a big mistake, however, to conclude from this that there is therefore no problem in feeding an ever-increasing populationâ€”even if the distortions of the market were removed.

What these predictions failed to take into account was the ability of ever bigger agribusiness, and ever more chemical fertilisers, to increase the productivity of food production. It left hundreds of millions at starvation level or worse in the process, and it produced increasing global food crises, but it did massively increase food production.

The problem, therefore, is not whether enough food can be churned out by ever-bigger agribusiness, using ever more chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and mono-cropping techniques, but whether it can be produced and distributed without destroying the ecology of the planet in the process.

What the planet needs is to move towards food sovereignty and towards smaller scale and more localised agriculture. This would be better for the soil, and better for biodiversity, and it would provide better food.

Small scale farming, however, without chemical fertilisers and pesticides requires far more land per ton of food than intensive farming. Whilst this is the right way forward is not an answer to ever-rising population. The amount of land and water needed would be prohibitive and it would have a further devastating impact on biodiversity, even if it were possible.

A radically new approach

The left needs a radically new approach to the whole issue of population and the environment. Such an approach, which has had support of many on the left as well as feminists and environmentalists for a long time, and which I strongly support, is based on the empowerment of women.

This sees population as first and foremost a feminist (or eco-feminist) issue. Women physically create each generation. They produce children and take the main responsibility for nurturing them. Global fertility rates are ultimately determined by the size of the families they haveâ€”which in turn is related to whether they have access to contraception and abortion, education and jobs, and whether they are exposed to conservative ideologies that oppose such access.

This approach is based on the view that most women, if they had free choice, would be unlikely to have the large families that prevail in much of the Global South. Some would, most would not. It argues that if women are able to control their own fertility, get access to education and jobs, and shed the influences of patriarchy and religion, fertility rates would fall further and the global population would stabilise. And it would improve the lives of millions of women in the process. It is a real win-win situation.

Interestingly Al Gore, in *The Future*, advocates this as a way of stabilising

the global populationâ€”as does Natalie Bennett, the leader of the Green Party in Britain and Caroline Lucas the Green Party MP.

It means supporting women in their struggle for the contraception and abortion facilities. It means supporting their fight to lift themselves out of poverty, and ensuring that they get access to education and jobs. It means giving women real choice over contraceptionâ€”by not, for example, forcing them to sign up to implants or coils which can only be medically removed when they give birth.

These are, in any case, issues that have long been the demands of the feminist movement and the left. We have rightly advocated a woman's right to choose in relation to abortion - the same is true for contraception.

Does this target the women of the Global South?

One of the arguments deployed against this approach is that since the highest fertility rates are in the Global South such a policy would be to 'target' the women of that regionâ€”who are not responsible for the climate crisis.

The only thing empowerment targets, however, is the appalling conditions the women of the Global South face and the unmet need for reproductive services. More than 220m in the region are denied reproductive services - which can be (and often are) the difference between life and death. There are 80m unintended pregnancies a year. 74,000 women die every year as a result of failed backstreet abortionsâ€”a disproportionate number of these in the Global South. Every year, around 288,000 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirthâ€”and 99% of them occur in developing countries. It is a policy that helps the women of the Global South and helps the planet at the same timeâ€”it is win-win again.

According to the UN the full range of modern family-planning methods still

remain unavailable to at least 350 million couples world wide, many of whom say that they want to prevent another pregnancy or create more space between them.

It should be stressed, however, that it is not just a matter of contraceptive servicesâ€”important as they are. The whole empowerment package is necessary for this to be successful: contraception and abortion, lifting women out of poverty, giving them access to education and jobs and protection from patriarchal pressure. It is this combination of factors which can make a change to both the birth rate and the lives of the women involved.

Does the carbon footprint of the Global South matter?

It is argued that whilst the impoverished peoples of the Global South have higher birth rates than the affluent North they have a much smaller carbon footprintâ€”of around 1 metric ton a year. The task, therefore, is not to reduce their footprint but that of the Northern populations.

This is true. Of course the high polluting populations of the Global North are the top priority as far as reducing carbon emissions are concerned. But the idea that rising population levels in the Global South do not matter is, in my view, mistaken. We have to address both, North and South, because they are ultimately a part of the same problem.

In any case populations trapped in poverty today rightly aspire to change their situation as soon as they can. In fact some countries with the lowest carbon footprint today have the highest economic growth rates and therefore a big potential for such change. China's footprint is already approaching 7 metric tonnes, after just 2 decades of capitalist growth. There is little point in assessing the impact of carbon footprints over the next 50 years on the basis of a

snapshot of the situation as it is today.

Also rising population is not just about carbon emissions but the total impact of the human population on the ecology of the planet. Whilst the carbon footprint of the South is much smaller than that of the North if we talk about the *ecological footprint*â€”i.e. the total per capita impact on the environment including soil erosion and depletion, deforestation and the impact on biodiversity the impact of the South becomes far more significant. Total numbers, therefore, matter.

It is argued that women have large families in impoverished societies because they are needed to provide labour and to help their parents in old age. Impoverished women do indeed come under great pressure to have ever-larger families for these reasons, but it does not necessarily ease the burdens they face. In fact women's health is undermined by repeated, often annual, pregnancies and smaller families would improve both their health and their quality of life. In fact it would give them a better chance of reaching old age.

Every new pair of new hands, moreover, is also another mouth to feed. Women still perform at least 80% of domestic labour. More than a third of households in the Global South are female headed, and where they are not women remain the primary providers of support. Expanding families are forced to degrade their own environment in order to get food water and fuel to survive.

It is argued that as women are lifted out of poverty they will automatically have fewer children. It is not, however, an automatic processâ€”crucial as it is. As women are lifted out of poverty they still face pressure from religion, patriarchy, and cultural factors, which oppose the use of reproductive services. This varies from country to country but it is a powerful factor. In Catholic Italy for example religious strictures and laws are outweighed by other factors but in Saudi Arabia they are dominant.

The Cairo conference

An important opportunity to promote the empowerment of women in this regard was the International Conference on Population and Development organised by the UN September 1994. It produced a *Programme of Action* (PoA) which called on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, by 2015 or sooner.

The PoA met with bitter opposition from a range of conservative forces from the pro-life/anti-abortion lobby led by the Vaticanâ€”on the basis that it supported abortion rights and the provision of contraceptionâ€”and it still does. It was also denounced on the left as a transmission belt population controlâ€”at least by some on the left, most ignored it. The implementation of the PoA requirements by governments was patchy, particularly after Bush took office in the USA and strongly opposed its decisions.

Feminists were sharply divided on it both at the conference and afterwards. Many had fought for the conference to happen and had fought for the decisions it eventually took. This approach is reflected in Laurie Mazur's book *A Pivotal Moment*â€”*Population Justice, and the Environmental Challenge* published in 2010. I agree with much, although not all, of what she says.

The conference, and its outcome, was denounced, most prominently, by the Indian feminist, and environmental campaigner, Vandana Shiva.

Shiva has a long and distinguished record on ecological issues in the Global South that can only be admired. She was already, however, an opponent of an empowerment of women approach to rising population and she denounced the conference (falsely in my view) for concentrating on the provision of reproductive services to the exclusion of development issuesâ€”and for (in her view) paving the way for population control.

She was heavily critical of Western feminists, and Western women's organisations, from this standpoint, regarding them as having been duped into this process. She promoted a very unfortunate polarisation between feminists North and South at and after the conference and her views have been influential in the debate on population ever since.

She objected to the way the PoA linked together the issue of rising population and the provision of reproductive rights "which she argued should be kept strictly separate. She claimed that any programme designed to give women in the South access to reproductive services would inevitably end up introducing coercive population control.

In her report of the Cairo conference, written immediately afterwards (in March 1995) jointly with Mira Shiva (no relation I understand), she attacks the PoA for reducing everything to reproductive rights, which she calls "biological reductionism". She puts it this way:

"At Cairo, women's multiple rights as full human beings in society were reduced to 'reproductive rights' alone. The Western women's movement contributed to this biological reductionism in Cairo by failing to focus on women's productive roles and by focusing exclusively on their reproductive roles, by failing to draw attention to denial of women's economic rights through structural adjustment and GATT, and allowing 'unmet needs' to be redefined as needs for contraceptives alone, and not needs for food, water and livelihoods. Further, by reducing women to their biology alone, and divorcing them from the economy and society, the western feminists have created a discourse which strengthens the hands of patriarchy based on religious fundamentalists. Western feminists thus strengthen religious fundamentalism in the Third World." (Her report can be found [here](#).)

She claimed that the Cairo conference: "was dominated by Northern women obsessed with individual sexual freedom, indifferent to society and to other freedoms."

This, however, was a caricature of the role of Northern women at the conference. It was also a caricature of the PoA. It is right, of course, to point to the inadequacies of the UN and to draw attention to role of GATT and its structural adjustment programmes "though whether Western feminists at the conference failed to do this is another matter. It is also right to point to the inability of the UN to carry out what it decides. This kind of misrepresentation, however, of what happened in Cairo does not clarify the issues involved or advance the cause of women.

The PoA, in fact, stresses throughout that it is crucial that the provision of reproductive rights do not stand alone but that they go alongside all the other stated objectives: lifting women out of poverty and giving them access to education, health care and employment.

The section on objectives in the PoA puts it this way:

"The objective is to raise the quality of life for all people through appropriate population and development policies and programmes aimed at achieving poverty eradication, sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development and sustainable patterns of consumption and production, human resource development and the guarantee of all human rights, including the right to development as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights. Particular attention is to be given to the socio-economic improvement of poor women in developed and developing countries. As women are generally the poorest of the poor and at the same time key actors in the development process, eliminating social, cultural, political and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of eradicating poverty, promoting sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development, ensuring quality family planning and reproductive health services, and achieving balance between population and available resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production." (PoA para 3.16)

It goes on: "Widespread poverty remains the major challenge to development efforts. Poverty is often accompanied by unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, low status of women, exposure to environmental risks and limited access to social and health services, including reproductive health services which, in turn, include family planning. All these factors contribute to high levels of fertility, morbidity, and mortality, as well as to low economic productivity." (PoA para 3.13)

Of course any programme to provide reproductive services, organised by the UN, national governments, private charities, or anyone else, can become corrupted and resort to coercive methods. If this happens they should be closed down.

The PoA also stresses the issue of free choice:

"The principle of informed free choice is essential to the long-term success of family-planning programmes. Any form of coercion has no part to play. In every society there are many social and economic incentives and disincentives that affect individual decisions about childbearing and family size. Over the past century, many Governments have experimented with such schemes, including specific incentives and disincentives, in order to lower or raise fertility. Most such schemes have had only marginal impact on fertility and in some cases have been counterproductive. Governmental goals for family planning should be defined in terms of unmet needs for information and services. Demographic goals, while legitimately the subject of government development strategies, should not be imposed on family-planning providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients." (PoA para 7.12.)

Another problem with Shiva's approach is that leads its advocates to find objections to family planning programmes, in order to make their case, and even to opposing reproductive services per se - under conditions where there is a desperate need to be met.

In fact in her article "[Women's Rights & Reproduction](#)" written just before the Cairo conference she appears to be ambiguous on abortion by insisting that the prevailing "Pro-choice" language reduces the larger issue of the well-being of women to reproduction, and then it reduces reproduction to abortion." She certainly has nothing positive thing to say about reproductive rights, either contraception or abortion.

She argues that the promotion of reproductive rights is being used as an alternative to development and that it should stop. That the PoA was (and is) a transmission belt to coercive methods—even if such programmes started on the basis of free choice.

To oppose all such programmes, however, because some might go off the rails makes no sense. The upshot would be to deny large numbers of impoverished women the reproductive services that they desperately need.

In my view the left should support the

PoA, along with other actions and campaigns with similar objectives, in calling on governments to make reproductive services universally available, on the basis of free choice, as a matter of urgency.

Such provision is first and foremost the job of governments, rather than charitable organisations or mega-rich individuals like Malinda Gates. Such provision should be readily available, free of charge, and devoid of any form of coercion or pressure.

Conclusion

The problem is that ecological crisis has become far more acute since the debates of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, when the "traditional position" of the left on this was shaped. Also the population of the planet has doubled since these debates were first set out.

It is now clearer than ever that climate change threatens a catastrophe of unknown proportions.

Carbon emissions have increased and global warming has accelerated. The seas are rising, the glaciers are retreating and the deserts are expanding. Rising population is not the main driver of climate change but it clearly compounds the problem.

The left needs to get beyond the old debates and recognise that there is a serious problem to address as far as rising population is concerned and that the way forward is through the empowerment of women to control their own lives. This would repair a gaping hole in our analysis of the climate crisis.

We have to deepen our approach as ecosocialists. In fact is that unlimited population growth cannot be sustained by the ecosystem of the planet, even if the ravages of capitalism are removed. This is why we have to make the ecological struggle an integral part of the struggle against capitalism today.

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