

The Ecological Challenge: Three Revolutions are Necessary

Alternative Libertaire

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Contents

1. The World is in Overdrive	4
1.1 The ecological peril	4
1.2 The imperialist peril	4
2. Capitalism is not the Solution	6
3. Three Revolutions are Necessary	8
3.1 Revolution in trade: putting an end to globalization	8
3.2 Revolution in the modes of consumption: the question of <i>décroissance</i> (“de-growth”)	9
3.3 Revolution in the modes of production: energy saving	10
4. Strategic Conclusion	11

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For decades, anti-capitalists have rightly raised the question of the “redistribution of wealth” between the Global North and Global South. This idea has commonly been imagined to mean an end to the pillage of the Third World by the advanced industrialized powers, so that the people of the Global South are able to attain an equivalent level of development. This demand, put simply, means that the South should catch up to the North's “standard of living.”

But this old view is clumsy and over-simplified, since certain countries are already fully in the process of “taking their share” of the cake that is Planet Earth, and this is accelerating the destruction of the great ecological balances. The arrival of China and India as industrial, political and military powers obliges revolutionaries to rethink, from top to bottom, issues surrounding the model of development itself.

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1. The World is in Overdrive

According to the “Living Planet Report” put out by the World Wildlife Fund in 2002, the world population’s “ecological footprint” increased by 80% between 1961 and 1999, to reach 120% of the Earth’s biological capacity. Though the figures used in this report are disputed, including in ecologists’ circles, there is general agreement with the fundamental idea: “Natural resource consumption can exceed the planet’s productive capacity by depleting the Earth’s natural capital, but this cannot be sustained indefinitely.”

This “ecological footprint” is the surface area (calculated in hectares) necessary to meet the natural resource needs of a given individual or population, and to absorb their waste. The ecological footprint of the United States is the most important in the world, at 2.81 billion hectares, or approximately 9.7 hectares per inhabitant. The European Union follows with 2.16 billion hectares, or 4.7 hectares per inhabitant. China follows in third place, with 2.05 billion hectares and rising — but only 1.6 hectares per inhabitant. Finally, India uses only 0.8 hectares per inhabitant, for a total of 0.78 billion hectares, already surpassing Japan. The study’s conclusion is beyond doubt: if every country were to maintain a level of production and consumption equivalent to that of the United States, we would need six Planet Earths. Three Earths would be needed for a level equivalent to that of the EU. If we stick to the traditional vision of the South “catching up” with the North, there is still a long way to go before “the South catches up with the North” — yet the regenerative capacities of the planet are already exhausted. This path of development, in which we can only race for control of increasingly scarce resources, burdens humanity with twin perils: the rise of imperialist wars on one hand, and ecological catastrophe on the other.

1.1 The ecological peril

Human activity is at the root of a set of extremely serious phenomena. Chief among these is global warming, which, according to current forecasts, could result in an increase of the average global surface temperature by as much as 5.8° C (10.4° F) by 2100. We have seen the first symptoms of this with a recent multiplication of natural disasters — the melting of Greenland’s glaciers and of the North Pole’s ice cap, the rise in sea level, desertification. Beyond climate change, other ecological perils threaten us: deforestation, reduction of the oceans’ resources, loss of biodiversity, and irreversible pollution by nuclear waste.

1.2 The imperialist peril

The sources of energy used today (oil, natural gas, uranium, etc.) are limited. The struggle for their control will lead to an exacerbation of imperialist rivalries, in particular that between the United States and China. After the Middle East, the new theatre of diplomatic competition and wars of influence lies in the oil-rich countries of Africa — Sudan, Gabon, Angola, Equatorial

Guinea, Nigeria, Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Chad. But the competition can only become more violent, as resources become scarcer, and the appetite of the great powers for energy continues to grow.

2. Capitalism is not the Solution

Capitalist society can be forced to evolve politically, through pressure from social movements on one hand, and on the other hand through the decisions that forge consensus among the ruling classes: In each country, at certain historical moments, the ruling classes can be brought to come up with a “doctrine,” to use their terms. The nerve centers of Capital, always tied up with the State apparatus, have a determining influence in the development of this doctrine: be it the nuclear lobby in France, the military-industrial complex in China, the oil multinationals of the United States, the natural gas and oil tycoons in Russia, etc.

At the world level, the “Who’s Who” of the capitalist oligarchy have for a long time given themselves forums where they devote themselves to futurology, such as the annual World Economic Forum at Davos, or the Bilderberg Group. The system’s self-questioning was expressed in the doctrine of “sustainable development,” drawn from the 1987 Brundtland Report, which recommended “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

In compliance with this doctrine, the Western ruling classes are increasingly taking the route of new technologies, developing renewable energies, and promoting recycling and “clean” production, among other things. As a result, technological innovations are implemented, mainly in First World countries, to prevent greenhouse gases from increasing “too much.” But it is important to see that this route brings no solutions:

- Any pollution reduced in First World countries, particularly under pressure from ecological struggles, is simply transferred to the Global South. There has been no total progress on the planet since this process began — quite the contrary.
- In all cases, the corrective measures being taken remain insufficient to reduce humanity’s ecological footprint.
- In the final analysis, these proposals are put forward only to avoid a total reassessment of the model of development that is ruining the planet.

While the United States has, for the first time, felt the full force of the consequences of climactic breakdown, with the destruction of New Orleans, the capitalist oligarchy has been completely incapable of posing the questions necessary to stop the process of destruction of the planet. We can understand the causes of the capitalist system’s inability to anticipate and self-regulate, if we simply examine the way it functions. Capitalism is fundamentally an unequal society. Its internal logic compels it to flee, suicidally, forward. Its ideology, the conditioning it imposes on the human conscience (frustration and violence caused by the appropriation of wealth by a minority, absence of solidarity, need for unlimited consumption, lack of individual responsibility, etc.), and its need for exponential growth to preserve a pretense of stability, are major obstacles, making control of its activity impossible.

On the whole, far from providing a solution to the process of the destruction of the planet, “sustainable development” is content to propose a model in which capitalists can repaint themselves as eco-citizens, where ecological struggles happen to make this label profitable. Thus, [energy multinationals such as] Total or Cogema extensively sponsor “sustainable development” actions.

This class-blind vision is particularly perverse because it tends to put the blame for pollution on the consumer who does not recycle enough, to better mask the industrial responsibilities of the multinationals or of states, who alone assume the right to determine what is manufactured, and shape consumer behavior with their advertisements. There will never be a solution without breaking from the current logic of production in the service of profit accumulation, to reach a production organized in response to the needs of humanity, and in the service of our well-being.

To remedy the current destruction of the planet, we’ll need much more than the technological revolution imagined by the doctrines of “sustainable development.” We’ll also need a revolution in trade and in the model of consumption. Here, we touch upon the mainspring of the capitalist system — the necessity of expansion. This amounts to calling capitalism itself into question. To avoid the destruction of the planet, there are only two possible routes:

- either to prevent the countries of the Global South from catching up with the “standard of living” of the Global North;
- or to reconsider completely the economic model in both the North and the South.

The first route, as cynical as it is utopian, corresponds to the statement George Bush, Sr. made at the time of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro: “Our standard of living is not negotiable.” In this view, since any revision of the level of consumption in one’s country is out of question, the only means would be to keep competitors at a distance, in particular by monopolizing energy resources to China’s detriment.

The second route implies a triple revolution: of the modes of production, of trade, and of consumption. Rather than an inevitable regression in everyone’s standard of living, what’s at stake is a reorientation of economic activity, in order to find an ecological balance.

3. Three Revolutions are Necessary

We could be satisfied to say that only one revolution is necessary: the socialist revolution. This is, in itself, completely accurate. But “socialism,” even when libertarian, does not in itself resolve the question of the model of development. Beyond the question of owning the means of production and abolishing wage labor, socialism must raise the question of humanity’s ecological footprint. And this prospect invites us to “think” now about what revolutions in the modes of production, trade and consumption that the planet needs.

3.1 Revolution in trade: putting an end to globalization

Global warming is caused by the totality of human activities emitting greenhouse gases. There is still no study that identifies the world’s most-polluting sectors, from this point of view. Let’s agree, for the purpose of our discussion, that transportation, with the boom in air transportation, is first in line.

In 2003, according to the Interprofessional Technical Center for Studies on Atmospheric Pollution (CITEPA), France emitted 557 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) into the atmosphere. The branches of industry responsible are as follows:

Transportation	26.5% (up from 22% in 1996)
Manufacturing industries	20% (23% in 1996)
Agriculture	19.5% (18% in 1996)
Building/Housing	18.5% (18% in 1996)
Energy production	13% (8% in 1996)
Waste treatment	2% (3% in 1996)
Refrigerating Gases (air conditioning)	5%

The transportation sector is the principal pollutant by volume, and there is no doubt that on a planetary scale the problem is similar, because of the explosion of trade with capitalist globalization. Today, the de-localization of production is such that the various components of a product, over the course of its manufacture and distribution, travel tens of thousands of kilometers. Transportation thus plays a key part in capitalist globalization, and the class struggles going on in this sector are therefore all the more important. The questioning of capitalist globalization thus does not only have a social and anti-imperialist motivation, it also has a fundamentally ecological motivation: there will be no massive reduction of greenhouse gases without a questioning of the international division of labor, a re-localization of production, and economic independence for the various regions of the world. Of course, it is not about preaching the logic of a closed, autarkic economy, but of one with an autonomous capacity for development.

3.2 Revolution in the modes of consumption: the question of *décroissance* (“de-growth”)

The concept of *décroissance* is often associated with voluntary simplicity. Individual initiatives are on the increase, along with the awareness of the extent of the problem, but also with a feeling of direct responsibility (in particular through the mode of consumption). These initiatives form useful counter-examples, making it possible to develop a collective understanding of the problem, but are in no way a counter-power. It is useless to hope for a generalization of these kinds of practices; the true solution can only be collective, and involve a radical transformation of society.

In addition to being a system of exploitation, capitalism is also a carrier of an inherent death-logic for humanity. Any alternative to it will have to take an ecological dimension into account, contrary to the preceding experiments of authoritarian socialism (or state capitalism).

The concept of *décroissance*, as such, does not bring any solution if it is not associated with a break with capitalism. Indeed, the U.S. economic crisis of 1929 and that of 1990 in Russia opened periods of strong economic “de-growth.” These “degrowths,” within the capitalist framework, only brought more misery for the poorest, without bringing any significant change in terms of “ecological progress.”

We affirm that:

- *Décroissance* as an objective remains ridiculous if it is not tied to the collective appropriation of the means of production. A non-class-based vision of *décroissance* is nothing but a new ideological flavor of the month, and libertarian communists can’t subscribe to it. It would lead, in the worst case, to a policy of rationing for the working class or, at best, to various individual solutions of “voluntary simplicity” with no global impact.
- *Décroissance* is one aspect, and not the totality, of the solution to climate change. It is necessary to associate it with a revolution in the modes of exchange and production.
- *Décroissance* cannot be an absolute objective: if the countries of the North consume too much, many countries of the South still need development — in the infrastructures of transportation, education, and health. And, within Northern countries, improved access to the same services for disadvantaged social groups is a necessity. As militant libertarian communists, we have no love for the exoticism which sees, in destitution and poverty, some “spiritual enrichment” in this heartless world. The revolution needed in modes of consumption can only be understood when differentiated according to the regions of the world. To simplify: it is necessary that the “rich” consume less so that the “poor” live better.

The “solution to the ecological challenge” means an economic upheaval implying a redefinition of:

- the purpose of production: organized only to satisfy the needs of humanity;
- the best possible use of technological innovations: to eliminate the most pollution, to spread the practice of recycling, and to produce practical goods, not designed to break down after a few years;
- the means of transportation (automobile, public transit system, road, rail, air);

- packaging and advertising;
- energy choices (fossil fuels, renewable energy, energy saving).

On the whole, we need to think about a general redefinition of what is necessary, and what is superfluous, in the economic system. Our objective is not an impoverishment of humanity, but a revolution in our ways of life: a drastic decrease in the consumption of material products and an enrichment of social and cultural life — a development of social relations, of culture, of art, and of knowledge.

3.3 Revolution in the modes of production: energy saving

The only positive aspect of the doctrine of “sustainable development” — and the exhaustion of fossil fuels — is to have on the agenda, for technological research, the questions of recycling, clean production, energy saving, green fuels, water saving in agriculture, renewable energies, ecological housing, etc. All these technological innovations should be claimed as our own, while we remain aware that they are only one aspect, and not the totality, of the solution to climate change. The question of energy will inevitably be at the center of the debate. And before the end of fossil fuels, the debate around nuclear power will start up again. But nuclear power is not a solution to the greenhouse effect. The share of nuclear power in the world’s consumption of energy is indeed marginal (3%). To imagine slowing down climate change with the construction of thousands of new nuclear power plants across the globe is completely foolish, because of the known health and environmental risks, and because current geopolitical tensions make power plants military targets of choice. Even if questions remain about how to end nuclear power in a country, such as France, which is ultra-dependent on the industry — and this should be the subject of a specific debate within *Alternative Libertaire* — we remain opposed to nuclear energy, which burdens our society with disproportionate health and social risks.

4. Strategic Conclusion

The environment is not simply a “humanist” question deprived of political stakes. To act concretely, we must analyze it in connection with class struggles, capitalist strategies, relations of production, imperialist power struggles around the world, etc. This is why we must speak, systematically, of political ecology. At the same time, the solutions to this major challenge, which is the destruction of the planet, transcend any simple opposition between capitalism and socialism. If it is obvious that capitalism in itself has no solution, we can’t affirm, in a symmetrical way, that socialism answers everything.

On the one hand, such an assertion would have the effect of postponing any action to some post-revolutionary future, which we have no indication will occur before the capitalism completely destroys the planet. Thus, not “three” but “one” revolution is necessary: the socialist revolution.

On the other hand, socialism must ultimately integrate the ecological question. Socialist models of the past are outdated — both the productivist model so dear to Stalinists and the old anarchist model of “abundance” in which “take from the pile” was supposed to resolve the question of production and consumption. Libertarian communism will have to reach a point of balance between the capacities to produce, the needs of populations, and the limits of the biosphere. And beyond rational management of natural resources, the ecological question must lead us to fundamentally reconsider humanity’s place on the planet. In the face of our Judeo-Christian heritage, which encouraged men and women to dominate the planet, we need to become aware that our existence is closely related to that of the whole living world. We cannot build our future against that of the rest of life. Here, too, the ideology of domination must be broken, so that humanity can find a future.

In the immediate future, in the anti-globalization movement — slumbering in the countries of the North, but always virulent in the rest of the world — it is essential to bear in mind a political compass pointing toward these necessary “three revolutions” in the modes of production, in trade, and in consumption.

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The comrades of Alternative Libertaire, in France, adopted this position paper on the current ecological crisis at their 2006 conference. Libertarian communist texts on ecology are all too rare, which is partly why we chose to publish it.

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