CRITICAL SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND LEFT PRAXIS

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We live in a world of change and crisis – politically and economically speaking. Capitalist accumulation is constantly adapting to new circumstances. Social analysis and left praxis have to take into account the permanent changes not only in the mode of production but, accompanying this process, also in the way of life. Moments of crisis sometimes offer unexpected opportunities for interventions to initiate social change. For this, an »interventive thinking« (Bertolt Brecht) is necessary.

Luxemburg is the new journal of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. We provide social and political analyses for a democratic, pluralist and global left. Rosa Luxemburg’s optimistic attitude toward the possibility of social transformation together with her intellectual skepticism serves as a guideline for our work. Our goal is to support cooperation and partnerships for strategic interventions and to create possibilities to learn from each other’s experiences in a global perspective. We organize debates between the German Left Party and social movements from all over the world. Our work addresses trade unionists, feminists, environmental activists and altermundialistas.

The journal is dedicated to the vision of a socialist and democratic transformation. The list of contributing authors includes, among others, Franco »Bifo« Berardi, Walden Bello, Patrick Bond, Nicola Bullard, Barbara Epstein, Bill Fletcher, Gregor Gysi, David Harvey, Chantal Mouffe, Eva Illouz, Edgardo Lander, Catherine Lutz, João Pedro Stédile, Hilary Wainwright.

For this sample copy, we compiled a selection of four articles by Michael Löwy, Raúl Zibechi, Oliver Pye and Susan George representing different perspectives on the current state of global capitalism and transformative social praxis. We hope you enjoy reading it.
The Global Justice Movement – or Global Justice and Solidarity Movement, or Global Resistance Movement, or, in the Latin languages, el movimiento altermundialista – is, without doubt, the most important phenomenon of anti-systemic resistance at the beginning of the 21st century. This vast galaxy, a sort of »movement of movements«, whose most visible manifestations are the Social Forums – local, continental or international – and the great demonstrations of protest – against the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the G8 / G20 or the imperial war in Iraq, does not correspond to the usual forms of social or political action. Being a large decentralized network, it is multiple and heterogenous, associating workers unions and peasant movements, NGOs and indigenous associations, women’s movements and ecological initiatives, senior intellectuals and young activists (or vice-versa). Far from being a weakness, this plurality is one of the sources of the movement’s growing and expansive power.

The international solidarities that grow inside this vast network are of a new sort, somewhat different from those of the internationalist mobilisations of the 60’s and 70’s. In those years, solidarity networks would support liberation movements, either in the global South – the Algerian, Cuban or Vietnamese revolutions – or in Eastern Europe: the Polish dissidents, the Prague Spring. A few years later, in the 1980’s, important movements of solidarity developed in support of the Sandinists in Nicaragua and of Solidarnosc in Poland.

This fraternal and generous tradition of solidarity with the oppressed has not disappeared from the new movement for Global Justice which started during the
90’s – far from it. An obvious example is the sympathy and the support on international scale for the Zapatistas, after the indigenous uprising of January 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico. But one sees here already something new emerging, a change of perspective. In 1996, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation called an intercontinental – ironically described by Sub-Commander Marcos as »Intergalactic« – encounter against Neo-Liberalism and for Humanity. The thousands of participants, originating from 40 countries, which came to this encounter – which can be considered as the first event of what will later be called movimiento alternmundialista – where motivated, without doubt, also by feelings of solidarity with the Zapatistas. But the aim of the meeting, defined by its organizers, was much larger: the search for convergencies in the common struggle against a common enemy, neo-liberalism, and the discussion of possible alternatives for humanity.

Here is therefore the new characteristic of the solidarities which are woven inside or around the Movement of Global Resistance to capitalist globalization: the fight for immediate aims common to all – for instance, the defeat of the WTO – and the common search for new paradigms of civilisation. In other words; instead of a solidarity with it is a solidarity between the various organizations, social movements or political forces from different countries or continents, which help each other and cooperate in the same battle, against the same planetary enemies.

To give a concrete example: the international peasant network Via Campesina associates movements as diverse as the French Confédération Paysanne, the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) and some huge peasant movements in India. These organizations support each other, exchange their experiences and act in common against neo-liberal policies and against their common opponents: the agribusiness multinationals, the seeds monopolists, the producers of GMO’s (genetically modified organisms), the big landowners. Their solidarity is mutual and they make up one of the most powerful, active and vocal components of the world movement against capitalist globalisation. One could mention other examples, among trade-unionists, feminists – the World Women March – ecologists or others. For sure, this process of revitalisation of ancient solidarities and invention of new ones is still at its beginning. It is fragile, limited, uncertain, and quite unable, for the moment, to put in danger the overwhelming domination of global capital and the planetary hegemony of neo-liberalism. It is nevertheless the strategic place where tomorrow’s internationism is being elaborated.

The dynamics of the Global Justice movement includes three distinct but complementary moments: the negativity of resistance, concrete propositions and the utopia of another world.
The first moment, the starting point of the Movement, is the great refusal, the protest, the imperative need to resist against the existing order of things. This is why the Global Justice movement constitutes, in fact, the International of Resistance that Jacques Derrida hoped for in his book Specters of Marx (1993). The initial motivation for the multitudes which mobilised against the WTO in Seattle (1999) was the wish to oppose, actively, not »globalisation« as such, but its capitalist and liberal form, i.e. corporate globalization with its sequel of injustices and catastrophes: growing inequality between North and South, unemployment, social exclusion, destruction of the environment and imperial wars. Not by accident the altermundoïsta movement was born with a cry, issued by the Zapatistas in 1994: Ya basta! Enough of that! The strength of the movement comes first of all from this radical negativity, inspired by a deep and irreducible indignation. Celebrating the dignity of indignation and of the unconditional rejection of injustice, Daniel Bensaïd wrote: »The burning current of indignation cannot be dissolved into the lukewarm waters of consensual resignation [...] Indignation is a beginning. A way to stand up and to start on the road. People are indignated, they rise up, and then see what happens« (2001, 106). The radicalness of the movement results, to a large extent, from this capacity of rebellion and insubmission, of this uncompromising disposition to say: no!

The hostile critics of the movement and the conformist media insist heavily on its excessively »negative« character, its nature of »pure protest«, the absence of »realist« alternative propositions. One must resolutely reject this blackmail: even if the movement did not have one single proposition to make, its rebellion would be entirely justified. The street protests against the WTO, the G-8 or the imperial war are the visible, concentrated and vocal expression of this defiance against the powers that dominate and their rules of the game. The movement is proud of its active negativity, its rebellious complexion. Without this radical feeling of refusal, the Global Justice movement would simply not exist.

Against which enemy is this rejection directed? The international financial institutions (WTO, World Bank, International Monetary Fund)? Or the neo-liberal policies? Or still the great multinational monopolies? All these forces, responsible for the commodification of the world, are among the favourite targets. But the movement is more radical. This word means, as we know, to go for the roots of the problems. Now, which is the root of the banks and monopolies’ total domination, of the financial market’s dictatorship, of the imperialist wars, if not the capitalist system itself? For sure, not all components of the Global Justice movement are ready to draw this conclusion: some still dream of a return to neo-
keynesianism, of the »thirty glorious« years of growth, or of a regulated capitalism, with a human face. These »moderates« have all their place in the movement, but usually the radical tendency predominates. Most of the documents issued by the movement challenge not only the neo-liberal and bellicist policies, but the power of capital itself. Let us take, for instance, the World Social Forum’s »Charter of Principles«, issued by the Brazilian Organizing Committee – composed not only of delegates from the unions and peasant movements, but also of the NGOs and of the Peace and Justice Commission of the Catholic Church – and approved, with small changes, by the International Council of the WSF. This document, one of the most representative and »consensual« of the altermundialista movement states:

»The World Social Forum is an open space of encounter whose aim is to deepen reflection, debate democratic ideas, formulate propositions, freely exchange experiences, and articulate in view of efficient actions, organizations and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to the domination of the world by capital and all form of imperialism, and which wish to build a planetary society grounded on the human being [...] The alternatives proposed by the WSF are opposed to a process of capitalist globalisation commanded by the great multinational enterprises [...]«. The main parole of the movement, »the world is not a commodity«, is not so far from the ideas of Karl Marx, who denounced in his Manuscripts of 1844 a system – capitalism – where «the worker becomes a commodity, whose worthlessness increases with the quantity of commodities it produces. The depreciation of the human world increases in direct relation with the rise in value of the world of things» (MEW 40, 511). The radicalness of the movements’ great refusal concerns the capitalist nature of domination.

However, in contrast to the assertions of the establishment’s scribes, the Global justice movement does not lack concrete, urgent, practical and immediately feasible alternative propositions. For sure, none of its bodies has approved a »common programm«, and no political force has imposed its project. But there appear, during the Forums and mobilisations, several demands which are, if not unanimous, at least largely shared and carried by the movement: for instance, suppression of the third world’s debt, taxation of financial transactions, suppression of fiscal paradises, a moratorium on GMO’s, the right of peoples to nourish themselves, effective equality between men and women, defense and extension of public services, priority for health, education and culture, protection of the environment. These demands were elaborated by the movements international networks – Womens World March, Attac, Focus on Global South, Via Campesina,
Committe for the Abolition of the Third World’s Debt – and by various other social movements. One of the great strengths of the forums is to permit the encounter and mutual share of knowledge of feminists and trade-unionists, ecologists and marxists, believers and non-believers, activists from the North and the South. In this process of confrontation and mutual enrichment, the disagreements do not disappear, but step by step a body of common propositions emerges.

Are these propositions »realistic«? The question is poorly formulated. In the existing relationship of forces, the power elites and the ruling classes refuse in bloc to consider them; they are literally un-imaginable for the neo-liberal pensée unique, they are intolerable for the representatives of capital – or, in the hypocritical version of the social-liberals, they are »unfortunately unfeasable«. But it is enough that the relationship of forces changes and the public opinions mobilises, in order for the powerful to be forced to retreat and to make concessions, while trying to empty them of all substance. The important thing in these propositions is that they are extensible: every partial victory, every concession obtained, every step forward, permits to move to the next stage, to a higher stage, to a more radical demand. We have here, in a different form than the traditional labour movement, a »transitory« dynamic, which leads, sooner or later, to challenging the system itself.

We touch here the third moment, as important as the previous ones: the utopian dimension of the »movement of movements«. It also is radical: »another world is possible«. The aim is not simply to correct the excesses of the capitalist world, and its monstrous neo-liberal policies, but to dream and to struggle for another civilisation, another economic and social paradigm, another way of living together on planet earth. Beyond all the multiple specific propositions, the movement harbors a more ambitious, more »global«, more universally transformative perspective. Here too, one would search in vain for a common project, a consensusal reformist or revolutionary programm. The altermundoialista utopia shows itself only in the sharing of certain common values. It is them that sketch the outline of this other »possible world«.

The first of these values is human being itself. The utopia of the movement is resolutely humanist, it requires that the needs, the aspirations of the human beings become the vital center of a re-organisation of economy and society. Its rebellion against the commodification of human relations, against the transformation of love, culture, life and health into commodities seeks for another form of social life, beyond reification and fetishism. Not by accident the movement adresses itself to all humans, even if it privileges the oppressed and the exploited as actors
of social change. The defense of the environment is also of humanist inspiration: to save the ecological equilibrium, to protect nature against the predatory attacks of capitalist productivism is the condition to assure the continuity of human life in this planet.

Another essential value of the altermundialista utopia is democracy. The idea of participatory democracy, as a superior form of citizenship, beyond the limits of the traditional representative systems – because it permits the population to exercise directly its power of decision and control – takes a central place in the discussions of the movement. It has an »utopic« value, in so far as it questions the existing forms of power, but at the same time it is already being put into practice, under limited and experimental forms, in several towns, beginning, of course, with Porto Alegre, the first venue of the WSF. The great challenge, from the viewpoint of an alternative society project, is to extend democracy to the economical and social sphere. Why should we permit in this areas the exclusive power of an elite that one rejects in the political sphere?

Capital has replaced the three great revolutionary values of the past – liberty, equality, fraternity – by more »modern« concepts: liberalism, equity, charity. The utopia of the Global Justice movement takes up the values of 1789, but giving them a new scope: for instance, liberty is not only the freedom of expression, organisation, thought, criticism – won at a high price by fierce struggles against absolutism and dictatorship over centuries. It is also, today more than ever, the freedom from another form of absolutism: the dictatorship of the financial markets and the oligarchy of bankers and multinational enterprises, which impose their interests on the whole planet. As for equality, it concerns not only the »social fracture« between the richest elite and the dispossessed masses, but also the inequality between nations, continents – the North and the South – as well as between men and women. Finally, fraternity – which seems to limit itself to the brothers (frates in latin) – wins by being replaced by solidarity, i.e. by relations of cooperation, sharing and mutual help. The expression civilisation of solidarity is perhaps the best summary of the movements’ alternative project. This requires not only a radically different economical and political structure, but also an alternative society which cherishes the ideas of common goods, general interest, universal rights, gratuity.

Another important value of the Global Justice culture is diversity. The new world of which the movement dreams is anything but a homogeneous one, where all are supposed to imitate a unique model. We want, say the Zapatistas, »a world where different worlds can find their place«. The plurality of languages,
cultures, music, food and life forms is an immense wealth which one must learn to cultivate.

All these values do not define a model of society for the future. They provide paths towards new opportunities. The road to utopia is not yet traced. It is the marchers themselves which are going to trace it.

For many of the participants in the Forums and the demonstrations, socialism is the name of this utopia. It is a hope shared by marxists and anarchists, radical christians and left ecologists, as well as by a significant number of activists of the labour, peasant, feminist or indigenous movements. A socialist democracy would mean that the great socio-economic and ecological choices, the priorities in terms of investment, the basic orientations of production and distribution, would be democratically discussed and decided by the population itself, and not by a handful of exploiters, in the name of the so-called »laws of the market« (nor, in a variant which already failed, by an all-powerful politiburo).

It wouldn’t make sense to impose socialism as the program of the Global Justice movement, but the debate on socialism – very much at the center of political life in several countries in Latin America, under the form of debate on »socialism in the 21st century« – is a legitimate part of the confrontation of alternative projects and ideas.

In any case, the Global Justice movement is not waiting for this utopian future to arrive, but is acting and struggling, here and now. Each Social Forum, each local experience of participatory democracy, each collective land occupation by peasants, each internationally coordinated action against war is a prefiguration of the altermundialista utopia, and is inspired by its values, which are those of a civilisation of solidarity.

LITERATURE
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»Searching for Utopia«, Jan Karpe, Photo: Marleen Keustermans
In South America’s poorest country, at 4,000 metres altitude, an enormous salt flat spreads out over a length of 100 km and a width of 80 km, reaching 200 metres at its deepest point. It could significantly improve the living conditions of Bolivia’s population, helping the country to make a giant leap.

Salar de Uyuni is probably the world’s largest lithium deposit. According to the United States Geological Survey, Bolivia holds roughly half of the world’s lithium (5.4 million tons); Chile owns three million, Argentina two million, China 1.1 million and Brazil 900,000 tons. Until now, no lithium has been produced in Bolivia. With 44 percent of the world’s production, Chile takes the lead, followed by Australia (25 percent), China (13 percent) and Argentina (12 percent). The Bolivian government estimates its own deposits at up to 8.9 million tons of lithium, 194 million tons of potassium, 7.7 million tons of boron and 211 million tons of magnesium. Lithium
is a critical component for the manufacturing of high-performance batteries for electric cars. For a considerable time now, large multinational corporations have been eyeing at the Bolivian’s deposits, with the last two years seeing an increase in conflicts. Besides the government of Evo Morales, significant actors include social movements and the global financial capital.

**RESISTANCE IS BUILDING UP**

In 1989, the Bolivian government of Jaime Paz Zamora grants a concession of exploitation for Salar de Uyuni to the Lithium Corporation of America (LITHOCA). Since the late 1960s, the area had been under the status of reserva fiscal, a state-controlled investment zone. Shortly after, the concession is repealed as Bolivian law requires a tender that, in the present case, had not been issued. From that incidence on, the people of the region as well as of the whole Potosí Department are aware of foreign interests in the salt deposits. Apart from LITHOCA, the companies SOQUIMICH and COPLA participate in the tender. In 1992, a contract is signed with LITHOCA. At this point, the social movements are emerging. The Association of Farmers from the Southern Altiplano (Federación Regional de Campesinos del Altiplano Sur, FRUTCAS) calls for a general strike and presses for the contract to be nullified: The latter provides for remarkably low taxes while granting the extensive use of public goods, such as water. After one week of general strike in the Potosi Departement the contract is annulled.

In 1998, the so-called Valda-Law reduces the reserva fiscal’s expanse to the crust of salt whereby exploration licences may be issued for the adjacent areas – as, for example, Rio Grande, that part of Salar de Uyuni that is supposedly the richest in lithium. During the 2003 protests, which end up lifting Evo Morales into office, the local communities of the Altiplano successfully fight for the Law’s annulment as well as for the restoration of state control over the whole area. From there on, the social movements also call for an export ban on unprocessed mineral ores. In September 2007, representatives from Potosí together with FRUTCAS elaborate a recommendation on how to exploit the brine on an industrial scale. Furthermore, they press for the creation of a public enterprise. In late 2007, Morales’ government commissions a group of engineers to draft a pilot project with a view to preparing the industrial production of lithium (and other metals like boron, magnesium and potassium). On April 1st, 2008, the government-run mining corporation COMIBOL (Corporación Minera de Bolivia) is authorised to set up a division for the industrial exploitation of Salar de Uyuni, named the Dirección Nacional de Recursos Evaporíticos (DNRE). Thereupon, »national priority« is given to the venture. Gaging stations are being installed in order to measure lithium concentration in the salt lake; the entire lithium deposits are electronically mapped. Specialized personnel is trained and hired since the know-how necessary for the conduct of technical assessments meeting internationally acknowledged standards is lacking.
THE PILOT PROJECT
AND THE MULTINATIONALS

On May 10, 2008, a prototype facility in the spur of the Alka Loma Hills is inaugurated. Today the facility’s staff counts 95 employees who produce 40 tons of lithium carbonate a month. The project supplies the local population with electricity and drinking water. Both are prime concerns of the central government and the social movements. This time, Bolivians themselves are to benefit from their riches; each step is taken slowly and prudently. First of all, an evaluation has to be done whether a yearly production of 20,000 tons of lithium carbonate is feasible without the production costs exceeding 3 U.S. dollars per kilogram. A channel that drains the brine onto solid ground, as well as an evaporation basin with a surface of thousands of square metres (to achieve a high concentration of minerals) must be constructed. The government intends not to solicit bids and decide on holdings and investments before the plant is operating. Meanwhile, the government and social movements are subject to great international pressure. Among those casting a covetous eye on the Bolivian venture are the Japanese companies Sumitomo, Mitsubishi and Jogmec, the French Bolloré (with its electronic car Bluecar), the South Coreans Kores and LG as well as the Brazilian corporation Vale, just to mention a few. It is especially the French that are pushing hard. They want to have a lithium carbonate plant built in Uyuni by 2013, complemented in the years thereafter by factories for the fabrication of lithium batteries. »We would like to get started as soon as possible«, declares Thierry Marraud, finance manager of the Bolloré-Group, in April 2010, in La Paz. What is new, is the strong pressure from Brazil. The same month Marraud is visiting La Paz, a Brazilian delegation headed by Marco Aurélio Garcia, President Lula da Silva’s special advisor, submits a notable offer. Brazil is planning to put up an industrial compound on the Brazil-Bolivia border to attract the gas and chemical industries to this area and thereby have the lithium processed on an industrial scale. Airports, streets and railways are to be built. Brazil’s incentive is not far to seek: The main point is to put multinational Vale (the world’s second largest mining company) into a favourable position and to avoid that Salar de Uyuni’s ten million tons of lithium and its potassium deposits are exploited by Northamerican, Japanese, Russian, French or Korean corporations without Brazil getting its fair share. Despite a strategic alliance between the two South American governments, Brazil came away empty-handed. Each party seems to be in a hurry – except for the government. Evo Morales proclaimed three conditions that are not up for negotiation: that national sovereignty over the resources is preserved and that the state holds a controlling share in both the mining companies and the manufacturing industry. The government’s rather »leisurely approach« in deciding on the industrial processing of the lithium is neither due to any incompetence nor to a lack of political will. What we are seeing is a population that, after having successfully fought a »water war« and two »gas wars«, is no longer willing to have its mineral resources pillaged.
A NEW AWARENESS

The latest study on the industrial processing of lithium provides a concise appraisal of the present situation: »What Bolivia is trying to do is hard – very hard. It is trying to break a curse – the paradox of plenty – that few impoverished nations escape. Its effort to escape that curse is extremely important, which is why so much of the world is watching« (Hollender & Shultz 2010, 7). The Bolivian people know what is at stake and, from what it seems, they don’t want to miss the opportunity.

The movements, particularly FRUTCAS, are observing every move of the government. They are aware that the multinationals are exerting enormous pressure on Morales’ government while some members of the latter are inclined to sell off the country’s resources – as long as they get their share as »business partners«. By contrast, the movements’ objective is »a considerate exploitation of the region’s strategic resources and to build up chemical and mining industries at the national level. Ultimately, the industrial utilisation of the salt deposits should serve the country’s and the people’s good and safeguard national sovereignty« (Petro Press 13, 21).

There are attempts to parcel Salar de Uyuni so as to facilitate the granting of mining rights to private companies. The Right is deliberately trying to divide Potosí’s population. As a consequence, the movements
united under the umbrella of FRUTCAS proclaimed that »all communities of the Southern Altiplano will keep a close watch on the salt lake«. An incidence at a mine close to San Cristóbal, 90 km from Uyuni, illustrates how this idea is put into practice. The mine belongs to the Japanese corporation Sumitomo, one of the world’s largest producers of zinc, lead and gold. Each day, 48,000 tons of rock are handled and 1,600 tons of enriched ore extracted at San Cristóbal. Although the company’s annual profit amounts to 1 billion U.S. dollars it pays no more than 35 million U.S. dollar taxes. This does not even cover the costs of the water Sumitomo extracted from the area, an area that is considered extremely arid. Mid April 2010, community members block the railroad to San Cristóbal by parking lorries on the tracks. They call for an electrification project and the installation of aerials. What’s more, they demand the main office of the newly-found state enterprise EBRE (Empresa Boliviana de Recursos Evaporíticos) to be located in Rio Grande. Sumitomo is urged to pay a fee for the 50,000 cubic metres of water used for production. In the night of April 16, the protesters squat and set fire to the office buildings of the Japanese company, threatening to devastate 80 containers of enriched ore ready for export.

The conflict in Potosí is not only one between local communities and transnational mining corporations. By signing EBRE’s founding decree on March 10, 2010, the central government approves that the enterprise’s headquarter be established at La Paz – instead of Potosí, as the constitution provides for. The civil committee of Potosí (COMCIPO), called into being to counter the central government’s line of action, together with members of the University Tomás Frias claim that only the Potosí Departement shall benefit from the lithium deposits. Just prior to local elections, the government abrogates the contentious decree. The bad news is that, »under the circumstances, these oppositionists foster the privatisation of the still public project and add to the claim that the reserva fiscal, ensuring the exclusive use by the state, be dissolved«. In response, FRUTCAS in April 2010 suggests to create a »Council of Social Control« that includes representatives of the region’s grassroots organisations. Meanwhile the government enacts a law that curtails the right of indigenous people to be informed and consulted by the state before the exploitation of resources on their territories is authorised. There’s no sign that the battle for lithium will end any time soon.

Translated by Niklas Schäfer

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1 The United States Geological Survey is a scientific agency under the authority of the United States Departement of the Interior.
2 This regulation warrants the state’s control over the region’s natural resources.
3 DNRE, June 2010, 9; www.evaporiticosbolivia.org.
It is perverse reasoning to champion the burning of food products as a climate-friendly alternative to the conventional use of fossil fuels. In view of the large number of hungry people we are seeing today, growing palm oil, soy beans, corn or sugar cane in order to feed them to our cars, is, as Jean Ziegler put it, a crime against humanity. According to the IMF and World Bank, biofuels substantially contributed to the massive rise in food prices between 2006 and 2008, causing up to another 100 million people to suffer from malnutrition. Even the much-praised positive effects of biofuels on climate are more than uncertain. Through direct or indirect (the supplanted agricultural production will exploit new land) conversion of forest areas, cultivation alone brings about additional carbon dioxide emissions. In Southeast Asia, peat forests that stored carbon dioxide for thousands of years are being drained and burned down. The scale of the process is alarming. By this
means, two thousand million tons of carbon
dioxide are set free every year – eight percent
of global emissions. Put another way: It would
take 692 years, in which no fossil fuels are
combusted, to compensate the emissions
resulting from the burning of peat forests.
Biofuels are thus of little help if emissions
are to be effectively reduced by 2050. The
problem of limited areas of land alone makes
a future substitution of petrol and diesel with
biofuels impossible. Converting the entire
global agricultural production of cereals, corn
and sugar into ethanol would still cover as litt­
le as 40 percent of today’s fuel consumption.
The global production of oil (soy, rapeseed,
palm oil etc.) would substitute no more than
10 percent of diesel consumption. Why, then,
do biofuels figure as the most prominent
element in Europe’s climate-related policies in
the transport sector?

Taking a closer look at the authors of
the European biofuels policy is eye-opening.
In 2005, the European Commission set
up the Biofuels Research Advisory Council
(BIOFRAC), among whose members are three
automobile companies (Peugeot, Volkswagen,
Volvo) and three oil companies (Neste Oil,
Shell, Total). Its follow-up committee, the
European Biofuels Technology Platform
(Total, Volvo, Airbus and like-minded aca-
demic research institutes, among others), is
currently striving to politically and technically
implement their »vision« of 25 percent
»biofuels« by 2030. Their intention is not to
supersede the oil and automobile society, but
to prolong it with the help of biofuels and
provide it with legitimacy by using a rhetoric
of sustainability. At the European level, a wave
of protest against this agenda has arisen and
has thwarted said »vision« to some degree.
Many environmental associations and NGOs
critical of globalization joined forces so as
to push through a moratorium on the EU’s
biofuel objectives. Even though the objec-
tive of 10 percent has not been abandoned,
England, the Netherlands and Germany
scaled down their national objectives. A
critical public has emerged that increasingly
considers biofuels as the »wrong solution« to
tackle climate change. One crucial aspect of
these campaigns is transnational networking
with movements from the regions where
biofuels are produced. By displacing the
production towards the South, a solution
understood in technical terms turns into a
socio-ecological area of conflict in which new
»societal relationships with nature« (Görg)
are enforced. Appropriation of land for the
specific mode of production of biofuels –
large-scale single-crop farming embedded
in transnational value chains – is a massive
attack on smallholder agriculture and hence
on food sovereignty in the South. In some
cases peasant farmers are evicted by force:
In Colombia, for example, paramilitary units
forced thousands of afro-colombian farmers
to flee their land in order to clear space for
palm oil plantations. In this regard, small-
holder organisations of the global network La
Vía Campesina (see Luxemburg 1/2010), such
as Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem
Terra (MST) in Brazil or Serikat Petani Indo-
nesia (SPI) in Indonesia, are spearheading the
resistance movement against the expansion of
biofuel plantations. The first successes have become apparent. Those masterminding the eviction in Colombia, for instance, are today standing their trial; in Indonesia and Brazil small farmers squatted land and recovered plantations to grow their own food. A second dimension of the conflict relates to the interconnection between indigenous peoples’ rights and the fight for environmental justice. As the major land grabs occur in peripheral areas where indigenous people still live from and protect the forest, plantation companies and state authorities there work together with a view to assert private land rights and the state’s sovereignty to the detriment of customary rights. In Papua New Guinea, for example, a law was recently passed that suspends indigenous peoples’ customary rights in the case of large-scale investment (e.g. concessions for biofuels). In Indonesia, the struggle for local control over forest resources according to traditional institutions (the Adat law) plays an important role in the work of the environmental forum Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI). The environmental question has become a social question.

The battle of peasant farmers, indigenous communities and environmental activists strongly shape transnational campaigns in cooperation with European NGOs. In this manner, a reasoning that exclusively draws on the protection of species is finally dismissed. At the same time, however, a division of roles and tasks ensues that is fraught with problems. In terms of stereotypes, these campaigns convey the following image: indigenous people, smallholders and orangutan there, drivers and companies here; victims there, critical consumers and professional NGOs, who represent the voice of the disenfranchised in politics, here. In this way, the complex social reality is poorly embraced and the opposition against biofuels laid down along certain patterns that may inhibit any future development.

It is a gross shortcoming of present campaigns that they hardly take into account the societal relationships with nature with regard to biofuel production. In Indonesia, for instance, expansion does not rely solely on violence and forced displacement but considerably on the peasant farmers’ voluntary participation. As small-scale producers they fall under the lure of wealth that palm oil seems to bring along. That is why today most conflicts about palm oil revolve around the terms of contract of production, yet the concept of palm oil production as such is not challenged. Similarly, millions of plantation workers are not an issue in transnational campaigns so far. The problem becomes manifest in terms of dependence from the global market and substandard wages. The fact that the leading companies are major corporations from the South (e.g. from Malaysia) – and that the governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil aggressively push the biofuel agenda as a national (and climate-friendly) path to development – adds another dimension to the intricate matter as it is.

It is particularly the liaison between the industry and state authorities in the South that plays a crucial role in the evolution of the
discourse on sustainability, giving an anti-colonial overtone to biofuels (environmental protection as the North’s protectionism). At centre stage is not the North-South Divide but the fundamental analogy of the agro-industrial agenda that consists of three principal elements. Firstly, the predominant mobility system based on streets, individual transport and air traffic is preserved and extended (as a growth paradigm here; as a right to catch-up development there).

Secondly, biofuels are declared inherently sustainable (since they grow back) and thus a viable solution. Thirdly, the critique against biofuels is incorporated by reinterpreting it as a matter of implementation – that is, as the mode of production in a given case – that can be remedied through sustainability criteria and certification schemes.

As to the last point, civil society is summoned to partake as a stakeholder and is thereby absorbed into the hegemonic project. This may easily turn into the movement’s tender spot since certificates can conveniently be used to endow older plantations (where wood clearing and land conflicts are fading into obscurity) with sustainable labels whereas expansion continues unabated, breaking into new markets. Against this background, market-oriented campaigns targeting critical consumers turn out to be a reversed commodity fetishism. To be more precise, putting emphasis on the purchasing behaviour of consumers in the North disregards the producers in transnational biofuel value chains. In order to negotiate principles, criteria and certification schemes, Northern NGOs get themselves into a continuous partnership with PR representatives and civil society agents of major corporations. Furthermore they constantly attend round tables to talk to managers – while they do not talk to workers in plantations, refineries, shipping and at petrol stations.

Neither is the notion of food sovereignty an adequate alternative, among others because smallholders hope to gain wealth by growing biofuels. The concept has to be linked to larger questions of how energy, mobility and industrial production shall be managed in the future. For the South this would imply not to follow a model of development based on biofuels. Instead they should make use of climate policy forums and debates to claim the free provision of modern technologies (such as solar energy), together with investments necessary for their implementation, as a settlement of the North’s climate-related debts. Especially the model of industrial conversion may prove to be expedient in this context, challenging the inherent premises (biofuels as greenwashing of the automobile society) and generating alternatives, rather than serving as a corrective of sustainability to the biofuel agenda. A transnational »social (and environmental) movement unionism« could do justice to the pivotal part workers are playing in any conversion strategies. To this end, emerging alliances in the conversion movement must be broadened by adding a North-South perspective.

*Translated by Niklas Schäfer*
We are still at a crossroads of crisis and a huge crash has occurred at the centre of this crossroads. One of the converging roads is the social crisis of inequality which has been building up over decades. Particularly since the neoliberal regimes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher took power, the share of capital compared to the share of labour in total wealth produced has been rising. Labour once received nearly three quarters of so-called »added value«; now its share is down to about 60 percent, with a corresponding increase for capital, up from about a quarter to 40 percent today. This means not only that the rich get richer but also that demand for economic goods and services is compressed because there is less wealth in the collective pocket of labour.

The relentless downward pressure of globalisation on working peoples’ salaries is a worldwide phenomenon and has been a huge factor in this process, with the result that inequalities have soared everywhere, both within...
our individual countries and also between the richer and the poorer countries. This is one part of the systemic crisis caused by neoliberal capitalism.

The food crisis is another of the roads converging towards the crash. It has been reinforced by growing inequalities, and reached its height in the spring of 2008 when it plunged tens of millions more people into dire hunger and poverty. Although the increased cost of petroleum didn’t help, the two main causes of the food crisis were the massive switch into agrofuels and financial speculation. Agrifuels subtracted a third of US cropland from food production and the EU Commission’s choice to move into these fuels had a similar, although less severe impact. The International Food Policy Research Institute, quite a conservative organisation, says that the choice of agrofuels added 30 percent to the cost of basic foodstuffs.

Second, when the subprime bubble burst, financial speculators were on the lookout for any new area where they could turn a quick profit and they stampeded into the completely deregulated commodities markets. In 2008, the volume of trade on these markets was twenty times as great as five years earlier. At one point, the price of wheat went up by 31 percent in a single day. Prices for basic staple foods doubled or tripled worldwide and poor people who already spent at least 80 percent of their meagre incomes on food could not keep up. Riots occurred in more than thirty countries.

The financial crisis itself is of course the third road leading to the crisis crossroads but to my mind the fourth road is by far the most dangerous and that is the ecological crisis of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Why should we fear it most? Because with finance, food, or even social inequality, if we make enormous political efforts, it is possible to go back and start over, we can correct our mistakes and prevent these crises from recurring. Not so with the environment – once runaway global warming has taken hold, the game is over. We are on the threshold of such an extreme event, perhaps we are already past it. But since we don’t know, we must act as if we still had time and make an all-out effort, right now, to reduce the burden we place on our unfortunate planet.

I want to argue now that the best way to overcome the crises of inequalities, of food and of finance is to concentrate on the ecological crisis because it offers us the best hope of escape through a massive economic conversion programme. My dream would be to see the world, led by the rich countries, undertake the conversion to a fossil-fuel-free economy on a scale similar to the conversion the United States undertook in the early 1940s as it transformed itself to win the war.

Harnessing the banks to finance this job could contribute to such a crash programme but even if successful, it would not be enough. We need massive public spending as well and we know that our present governments will immediately reply that they haven’t enough money to undertake such a venture. Here, the left of the left has some answers. We have been proposing them for years and technically speaking they are ready to go. Although we
don’t have space to go into detail, please believe that we face no technical problems, either with environmentally friendly solutions or with financial techniques to pay for them. We are not in utopia here but in well-charted territory. Yes, some ecological solutions are now slightly more expensive than fossil fuels, especially with oil as cheap as it is today, but the prices of alternatives can go down sharply when mass production takes over and research in the relevant science and technology gets the proper support. Meanwhile, public subsidies should make up the difference so that alternatives are economically attractive options. Huge numbers of new jobs would be created and health would improve as pollution was reduced.

The financial solutions require no new thinking either – just a bit of software code and a great deal of political will. What, besides control over the banks should be on the public agenda? Here, again without going into detail, are several items. 

**Tax the highest incomes.** Most governments following the neoliberal religion have steadily decreased taxes on their wealthiest citizens, using the fallacious excuse that such people were the principle creators of wealth and engines of growth. This is a lie – the wealthiest already have nearly everything they need so they put their money into various markets or give it to people like Bernard Madoff in hopes of making huge returns. It’s time to respect century-old principles of the graduated income tax and reinstate inheritance taxes as well. This is a national measure and easier to put back in place than the international ones that follow.

**Tax international financial transactions including currency transactions.** Since it was founded ten years ago, Attac in particular has been proposing international taxation. The tax on airplane tickets adopted by about 14 countries is a drop in the ocean but it shows that international taxation is possible. A tax of one basis point, or one per thousand, would not harm anyone. Depending on the volume of transactions, which before the crisis was over three trillion dollars per day in currency trades alone, such a tax could raise tens of billions to be placed in public trusts for environmental conversion.

**Cancel the debt of the South.** The G-7 has talked about this for ten years but has never gone further than about 20 percent cancellation for the poorest countries. It’s time to act, but also to insist that the countries receiving cancellation participate in the environmental effort through reforestation, biodiversity conservation and other environmental programmes. We know that Sub-Saharan African elites between the mid-1970s and 2004 stole over 420 billion dollars and sent them to Northern tax havens, so it is not unreasonable to recommend that debt cancellation also be monitored by external, impartial auditors. I would also like to see governments required to hold elections so that their own citizens could participate in a national council whose objective would be to follow the money and insure it was well-spent.

**Close down tax havens.** Several well-known people have recommended this and the Vatican has come out very strongly against them. My British friends tell me that Gordon Brown
might accept that some offshore havens be closed, but surely not the many British ones like Jersey, but the pressure is building. We also know that at least half of world trade goes via one or several tax havens; that wealthy individuals and transnational corporations are not paying at least 250 billion dollars in taxes to many governments. This will be true so long as they remain immune from national laws. Only small people with a fixed address pay taxes today.

Get transnational corporations under control. Aside from using tax havens to the fullest, TNCs are masters of transfer pricing in order to reduce their taxes to the absolute minimum. A simple mobile telephone may involve – truly or fictitiously – more than two dozen countries, and each transaction whether material, like the purchase of components, or immaterial like the purchase of advertising or banking services offers an opportunity to manipulate prices and thereby taxes as well. Let me quote the accounting firm Ernst and Young who are anxious to help out in this manipulation: »Transfer pricing affects almost every aspect of an MNE – multinational enterprise – and can significantly impact its worldwide tax burden Our...professionals help MNEs develop transfer pricing strategies, tax effective solutions and controversy management approaches that best fit their objectives«. Let’s indeed encourage controversy about how these corporations cheat and see how Ernst and Young and their clients use their controversy management strategies to deal with us. Meanwhile, it’s important to know that some radical economists have already proposed a »unitary profits tax« on transnationals that could quickly
get rid of such abuses. It would require that transnational corporations publish their sales, profits, number of staff, and taxes paid in each jurisdiction and would show at a glance if they were cheating.

**Issue European bonds for public works, particularly public transport.** Astonishingly, the European Central Bank, unlike any other central bank, refuses to issue bonds for improvements in European infrastructure. Such eurobonds would be triple AAA investments and would allow us to develop environmentally friendly rail and water transport networks and European wide programmes to favour alternative energy. The independence of the ECB is a major obstacle to green conversion in Europe.

What about the Bretton Woods Institutions and the WTO that the G-20 are so anxious to restore to their former glory? The world needs international institutions but not the ones we have now. I would recommend that we go back to Keynes. Although many of his ideas were overruled by the Americans at Bretton Woods, they are still valuable. His proposal for an International Trade Organisation, much of which survived after his death in the Havana Charter of 1947, would have been a far better starting point for trade rules than the WTO, which contain not one word about labour rights or the environment. Keynes’ international currency, the bancor, would have avoided the abysmal deficits and stratospheric trade surpluses we witness today. This currency would have prevented the Third World debt crisis as well – so the IMF and the Bank would never have had an opening for their deadly policies. Since 65 years have elapsed, Keynes’ ideas would obviously need to be dusted off and modernised for our own circumstances, but we need a new international system which the UN unfortunately does not seem able to provide.

Now, as I come to my conclusion, I can hear some of you whispering to yourselves or to your neighbours, »She still hasn’t told us how to get beyond capitalism and it’s capitalism that’s the real problem«. You are right on both counts – it is the real problem and I haven’t given a blueprint to get rid of it.

I believe that the future will be and should be different in different places, if only because of geography, culture and a host of other factors particular to each society. For me the main feature is that whatever the outcome, it should come about through a democratic process. In other words, democracy should be both the means and the end.

Right now, I would settle for a little less complacency, a little more boldness. Most politics today seems to me anesthetised and anesthetising, too technical, too incomprehensible and therefore for most people unattractive, possibly frightening. We need a new »Mythos«, a new Grand Narrative, a new planetary cry that resonates a real »Yes We Can«. »Yes, the Human Race Can«. Yes, all humans desperately need the planet. This planet and our fellow humans desperately need us. Yes, we can act to be worthy of both the planet and of our fellow humans. Yes, we can act to be worthy of history even though history has dealt us the most difficult hand ever to be put on the table in the entire long unfolding of life earth. We have no choice but to play it.
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