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An alternative approach to “a socio-ecological transformation of Europe”

26th Annual Conference of the EuroMemo Group on Alternative Economic Policy in Europe:
A post-COVID 19 global-local agenda for a socio-ecological transformation of Europe.

Introduction

“The European Green Deal”¹ of the European Commission is now the focus of the debate not only of climate change but implicitly also of social and political development. It might be argued the other way round that the ‘mode of production’, as we are used to call it, is at a critical stage of transformation, of which climate change and the depletion of natural resources are only secondary symptoms. Whether we perceive it as a late stage of capitalism, or its final demise is only a matter of linguistics. At any rate, the chances of survival and defeating the threat of the Coronavirus Pandemic do not depend on success in capitalist competition. Up to date it was the largest global monopolies, tech companies, who did not only survive but phenomenally expanded with gigantic profits.

It may be premature to classify the present crisis of the production process as a major economic turning point. Politicians tell us that the return to normality and growth is only a matter of time. Instead it is essential to identify this suicidal exploitation of natural resources for human consumption as a new stage in the global socio-ecological transformation under the impact of continuing human intervention in this process. Therefore, this “Green Deal” cannot possibly be regarded as a means of repair or restoration of a lasting stable status. It ought to be an intervention in a process of development demanding a vision of a future perhaps increasingly complex socio-ecological formation definitely beyond national or national federations’ boundaries.

However, such a perspective still seems unrealistic within the limitations of existing civil government and their economic policies. But whilst we must act under restrictions of present-day social formations, we may nevertheless benefit from a strategic outlook transcending the limitations possibly already close to a catastrophic break-down, which becomes even more likely under conditions of static reproduction. Such a strategic view is in fact totally absent in the “European Green Deal” of the European Commission as well as in the response of the “EuroMemorandum 2020”. This paper will try to open the debate envisaging a wider panorama of options “for a socio-ecological transformation of Europe”².

Exclusive contradiction between economy and ecology

The title of this “26th Annual Conference on Alternative Economic Policy in Europe” is explicit in addressing “a socio-ecological transformation”. However, this terminology presents socio-

¹ Proposal for a ‘Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council’ establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1999 (European Climate Law), Brussels 4. 3. 2020.

² Call for Papers for the 26th Annual Conference of the EuroMemo Group.

ecology as a scientific subsector of economics. Such a terminology corresponds with a definition in “The European Green Deal” of the European Commission which is the subject of the EuroMemorandum 2020. The wording of the Commission unmistakably underlines ‘growth of the competitive economy’: “The European Green Deal ... is a new growth strategy ... with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy ... where economic growth is decoupled from resource use.”³ Consequently, the EuroMemorandum 2020 rejects this “growth strategy” in the last paragraph of its “Introduction”: “... a progressive Green New Deal will not suffice to overcome the expansionist logic of the capitalist mode of production.”⁴ But it is not only insufficiency, it is the contradiction between economic and ecological criteria, between competitive exploitation and a sustainable cohabitation between human and non-human nature which excludes a compromise between two contradictory modes of production coexisting in a process of transformation. Political intervention in favour of ‘a socio-ecological transformation’ will have to exclude economic exploitation under competitive free market conditions.

Production in a socio-ecological use of natural resources for social distribution

In a socio-ecological process production extracts natural resources to be transformed into means of subsistence and to be distributed equally to the members of human society. By the end of the 17th century John Locke still perceived this as a process of private appropriation: “As much as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much it is his property.”⁵ At the present stage more than 300 years later the mode of appropriation has changed. A worker on an oil platform does not own either the platform, the sea around nor the oil being pumped from the geological layers below. Under the dominance of finance capital, property development has turned into a process increasingly independent from production including the exploitation of labour and natural resources. Nevertheless, human physical and mental labour remains the agent in the process of transformation of natural resources into means of human subsistence and their social distribution. Under ecological criteria, the present globally dominant economic regime of competitive capitalism, generating the growth of property through exploitation of human and non-human natural resources, is inherently suicidal. Climate change is only the most obvious and dangerous symptom of its destructive effects. Above all, the labour process needs to be transformed according to ecological criteria and the product distributed according to human needs and preferences instead of property accumulation.

Reorganising the labour process according to ecological criteria

According to ecological criteria, instead of generating objects of property and consumption, labour will have to be applied to develop the wellbeing of individuals in a society based on a sustainable use of extra-human natural resources. This destination can only be achieved through a cooperative instead of the current ‘market’ employer-employee relationship. Under these relations, organically every healthy individual is a participant in the universal social labour process. This includes education as a necessary component of labour⁶ varying according to age. In a divided cooperative global production process, the geographical, horizontal, and vertical

³ Proposal for a ‘Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council’, Brussels 4. 3. 2020, COM(2020) 80 final, p. 9.

⁴ “A Green New Deal for Europe – Opportunities and Challenges”, EuroMemorandum 2020, . p. 9.

⁵ John Locke (2002) *The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration* (First published 1690) Dover Publications Mineola, New York, p. 14.

⁶ On education included in universal wage work (salaire universel) see Bernard Friot (2012) *Puissances du salariat*, Nouvelle édition augmentée. La Dispute, Paris.

organisation of labour is a matter of qualification with adequate pay differentials on top of subsistence and public services provided by civil government.

As an essential innovation, the division between physical and mental labour will become redundant, as every occupation requires both qualifications though perhaps in different proportions. Innovation and development will to varying degrees be an inherent remit of every occupation as well as representing particular subjects of work.

Civil governments will cease to represent specific ethnic, religious, or national identities. They will be integrated eventually in the global social labour process in charge of continental, regional and local administration of the production and distribution process, its infrastructure and jurisdiction.

Strategic Panorama of “a socio-ecological transformation of Europe”

This conference of the EuroMemo Group has been called to discuss “a truly transformative agenda that deepens global cooperation on vital issues of humanity like climate change, public health and migration, while at the same time reinforcing local sustainable development in the EU.”⁷ It is obvious that a single paper cannot possibly cover contribute than a few elements to this subject. Yet even such elements cannot be conceived in isolation. They need to be embedded in a strategic panorama as a precondition for defining their specific contribution to the ‘transformative agenda’. Therefore, before proceeding to contribute to such an agenda, a structural concept of a strategic panorama will be outlined:

- a) the unity of human and non-human nature,
- b) the use of natural resources,
- c) the transformation of production,
- d) the distribution of the social product,
- e) the geography of the ecological panorama,
- f) Capital accumulation and property rights.

The paper will then put forward contributions to an agenda for discussion.

a) The unity of human and non-human nature

From an ecological point of view nature is divided into species and, at the same time, a unity of interacting materials, plants, and animals. Animals, again, include humans as a late particular, in some ways dominant, species, homo sapiens originating about 400,000 years ago. What is at stake in the context of the Green Deal or socio-ecological transformation is the unity of interaction in particular between human and non-human nature. At the present stage of irreversible historical transformation, the human species puts itself at risk of serious harm or even extinction.

b) The use of natural resources

Dead or living nature exists in a permanent process of transformation in which, once the rotating globe took its specific shape with geological layers covered by top soils, mountains, rivers, and oceans under the sun as its main provider of additional energy. Major symptoms of this transformation are, among others, climate changes beyond the timescale of humanity such as

⁷ Call for Papers and Participation, letter to Colleagues.

ice ages billions of years ago. The contraction of the globe and related movements of its crust are more observable with volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. But what is presently addressed as environment and climate change under the impact of human interaction are transformations at a timescale of centuries, years, and days. The use of natural resources and a rise in the global population from 990m in 1800 up to 7,700m in 2019⁸ has become a threat to humanity through the exhaustion and undermining of indispensable living conditions.

c) The transformation of production

Human labour power transforms natural resources into means of human subsistence and consumption in an increasingly complex global social production process. This is the focus of economics, the exploitation of labour power and non-human natural resources for the sake of growth and accumulation of the social product. It is under this dynamic that society has taken its specific formation and power relations in private and public institutions, including national and transnational governments. In its present form it is inherently self-destructive through the depletion of these resources, for instance the exploitation of fossil fuels. A transformation of the present-day global form of production cannot possibly be envisaged without a profound change in societal structure and government.

d) The distribution of the social product

Under the capitalist regime, the distribution of the social product rests on two pillars, benefits from property and wages – or salaries – in relation to labour input. The share of property benefits, interests, dividends, profits and speculative gains has been rising in particular with capital accumulation since the end of the nineteenth century, whilst the development of the wage share reached a maximum equivalent to the rise of labour productivity. In most classical capitalist countries the wage share in gross national product has been declining since the 1970s. From an ecological point of view, only labour contributes to production, that is the transformation of natural resources into means of human subsistence and consumption including investment in its development. Accordingly, the entire social product will be distributed to the population contributing its production.

e) The geography of the ecological panorama

A panorama of the globe differs fundamentally whether it is perceived from an ecological or an economic point of view. The present geographical structure reflects the social conditions of the capitalist economic regime. It is hardly possible to predict a panorama reflecting an ecological transformation, but a few features immediately come to mind. As soon as renewable energy is based on the radiation of the sun, the power of the wind and the flood of the oceans, areas of mining fossil gas, oil, coal, and minerals will become obsolete for extraction. The global centrality of Europe under imperial capitalism is going to vanish. The boundaries of competing nation states will be replaced by delimitations related to global ecological exchange with respective infrastructure and settlements. Urban concentration based on capital accumulation will lose its function. The change in the panorama may be a long-term process but with important consequences for short-term productive investments, settlement, and migration.

⁸ <https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth>

f) Capital accumulation and property rights

Property rights are always enacted in relation to dominant objects of property as a means to regulate power in society. They may even be part of a national constitution. When new objects of property or social relations develop, property rights may need to be adapted in order to maintain a specific form of social justice. In the last century at a global level finance capital accumulation and concentration reached a level which transcends by far the levels determining existing legislation. The power of capital is about to transcend the levels of civil government. Billionaires are usurping political power and even becoming heads of states.

Contributions to a global-civil agenda

An 'agenda' literally means a plan for action, in this case to be submitted to the European Commission. As the powers of the European Union are very limited or indirect, effective action will ultimately depend on how the member states adopt this responsibility. In this context we ought to be aware that at present the European Union has not yet phased out subsidising the fossil fuel industry in a number of member states and that Greece is starting further explorations in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. But subsidies are only secondary instruments. Intervening in the whole process of extraction, production, and consumption of natural resources requires powers of state government to restrict or withdraw existing constitutional rights. These are acts of almost revolutionary political and legal transformation, definitely beyond the reach the European Union's constitutional powers. But there is no reason not to discuss them with the perspective of further political action. It should be kept in mind, however, that we are dealing with a 'global-civil agenda' which transcends the constitutional structures of the nation states as well as the European Union. Given the reality of the subject, this discussion is not only necessary but an emergency, which will be addressed as 6 fields of action:

- a) global hydrocarbon emissions,
- b) exhaustion of limited resources,
- c) energy consumption,
- d) growth of production,
- e) labour under employment relations,
- f) capital accumulation and property rights.

Each heading represents only a particular aspect of the same ecological development as a possible field of action as it is defined by the relationship between human and non-human nature in its process of transformation.

a) Global hydrocarbon emissions

In recent years climate change has become the most recognised general aspect of the ecological crisis of human society. With rising levels of hydrocarbon emissions solar radiation is raising the average air temperatures across the globe causing a variety of effects detrimental not only to human life but also to other sectors of nature. Irrespective of the location of emissions, melting ice caps, flooding of land, drying out of vegetation, burning of forests, destructive torrents etc. are irreversibly changing the natural environment. The only means to stop this transformation is a radical reduction in hydrocarbon emissions produced by the combustion of fossil fuels.

b) Exhaustion of limited resources

Life is essentially sustained by processes of exchange between different species of nature. For humans, the fruits of plants provide food, the soil building material, air oxygen for inhalation, wells and rivers water, animals milk for drink etc. mostly in sustainable abundance. Through targeted cultivation certain provisions can be extended. After use and consumption waste and excrements as well as, after the end of life, human bodies are returned to extra human nature. Most of these resources are sustained in a circular exchange, but some will be exhausted in the foreseeable future. Fossil fuel is the product of natural transformation over a different time scale. Under the present speed of exploitation, it is a limited resource about to be exhausted within the time scale of centuries. This form of the use of natural resources is an unsustainable exploitation to be abandoned as soon as possible.

c) Energy consumption

The same as other animals', human life depends on the provision and use of energy in the form of temperature and movement generated by the combustion of carbon in the body. The power of the body was the main resource of energy in human production until the beginning of industrialisation with the steam engine at the turn of the 18th century. Ever since energy consumption has exploded exponentially to provide power not only for manufacturing but also for heating and transport. Under this dynamic of economic growth and associated capital accumulation, energy demand and consumption still keep increasing up to date. The main source of energy has remained fossil fuels, though the share of wind and solar energy has been rising in recent years. Nevertheless, energy consumption still needs to be drastically reduced, mainly in heating of buildings, transport and manufacturing.

d) Growth of production

The transformation of natural resources into means of human subsistence has degenerated under the dynamic of capitalist growth. In excess of serving the needs of subsistence, capitalist production has developed as a means of property accumulation and wasteful consumption. This development is driven by competition as the essential incentive of capitalist production. Its success is measured by the level of 'growth of domestic product' (GDP) as the general indicator of beneficial macro-economic development. From an ecological point of view, this growth is instrumental in the exhaustion and destruction of natural resources, the pollution of air and water as well as waste disposal on fertile soil.

e) Labour under employment relations

Under capitalist economic relations, labour is a commodity bought and sold on the 'labour market'. In this relationship society was originally divided between employers and employees, between owners of the means of production and owners of labour power. During the 20th century ownership of the means of production became increasingly indirect in the form of shareholding and other financial assets. In this development labour became divided by astronomical differentials in wages and salaries. Correspondingly, the employment relationship has begun to disintegrate under a variety of statuses such as self-employment, agency- and platform labour etc., lacking the legal employment rights of social benefits, security, and insurance. Labour rights would necessarily be central in a socio-ecological production process serving the needs of humans.

f) Capital accumulation and property rights

Property rights are always enacted in relation to dominant objects of property as a means to establish and regulate power in society. They may even be incorporated in the constitution of national governments. When the substance or new objects of property develop, property rights may need to be adapted in order to maintain a form of social justice. In the last century at global level financial capital accumulation and concentration rose to a level transcending by far what had been conceivable in the past. These powers of a financial elite supersede the authority of national governments and the code of human rights, the basis of civilisation. The uncontrolled exhaustion of crucial natural resources is only one example of abuse of these powers which desperately need to be restricted at global level.

Tactical Agenda under the strategic panorama

The agenda for a socio-ecological transformation is not only a matter of deciding what to do but at the same time of the political power to carry it out. The present prevailing economic dynamic is enshrined in private property rights under state governments. If in its 'Green Deal' the European Commission proposes to achieve 'economic growth ... decoupled from resource use',⁹ it ignores in fact that capital's property rights of free access to fossil fuel as the main source of energy and hydrocarbon emissions is a crucial obstacle to the intended transformation.

Another equally basic obstacle to an agenda of socio-economic transformation are employment relations as a condition allowing employers the use of labour in production to make profits for the sake of property accumulation. In a socio-ecological regime labour is to be in control as well as the sole recipient in the production process destined to represent a social status incompatible with employee subordination.

At first sight these two issues of an agenda – 'plan for action' – appear to be faced with these insurmountable obstacles. However, the present state of transformation under capitalist dominance is not without contradictions and, perhaps, opportunities for socio-ecological interventions concerning a) property as well as b) labour relations.

a) Transformation of property relations

In post-feudal European history property relations have been in a permanent process of change driven by the development of the dominant object of property. The first legal act regulating property rights, passed in 16th century England, related to landownership as the determinant object.¹⁰ As the objects of property developed, e.g. to means of production, financial and intellectual assets, legal regulations were and keep being adjusted. The most recent global debate about property rights is about rights and the use of information, concentrated in a few giant global 'tech' monopolies. This process of transformation of the object of property was accompanied by a mutation of the owners of property. Whereas in the 16th century the landowner was a distinct individual person, personal ownership in financial assets is in a permanent process of fluctuation and the financial capitalist has no control over distinct real assets, e.g. fossil fuel resources. In other words, ownership has become increasingly divided from its objects, yet without respective legal adjustments. This is the general situation under which for socio-ecological reasons, e.g. the exploitation of fossil fuel has to be prohibited. On the contrary,

⁹ Proposal, p. 9.

¹⁰ Statute of Uses, 1535-6, 27 Henry VIII, c. 10.

the insulation of buildings is already under building and planning regulations. It might be argued that under the present capitalist dynamic, property relations are already in a process of socialisation and rather open to a socio-ecological transformation.

b) Transformation of labour relations

Since the Bubonic Plague or ‘Black Death’ in the middle of the 14th century, labour relations came to be regulated in many places across Europe. In England even a special labour jurisdiction was enacted, the ‘Justices of Labour’. The main issue of these regulations was the rates of wages to be paid by the employers of labour according to working time or amount of work. Gradually more and more conditions became legally enacted, such as maximum working time, terms of notice for dismissal, form of contract etc., always under the authority of the individual employer. A qualitative transformation occurred in the early stage of industrialisation, when wage earners started to act in unions and to bargain collectively for agreements on wages and working conditions. From the end of the 19th century this relationship was consolidated by law and the states began enforcing social security and benefits, until eventually civil government supplemented these wage/salary regulations by direct support and services including unemployed workers. Gradually the employment relationship has been transformed to become almost a civil status. It is not a coincidence that the proportion of workers covered by collective agreements is now mostly decreasing and that new forms of employment, such as self-employment, agency- and platform labour etc. are replacing traditional labour contracting. It would be only a minor step to regulate labour directly under civil government and jurisdiction as a civil status.

Transition to a socio-ecological regime

Given these central component aspects of an ongoing transition, the anonymisation of the capitalist employer associated with labour conditions mainly under regulations of civil government, a ‘socio-ecological transformation’ is only a matter of completion. However, in the present debate, the dominant criteria for assessing productive progress remain growth of the social product and profit on investment under conditions of free competition. According to these criteria, the extraction and use of fossil fuels are being promoted. Climate change is only one aspect of this self-destructive capitalist production. The same is also convincingly put forward in the ‘EuroMemorandum 2020’: “...socio-ecological transformation will eventually have to overcome the expansionist dynamics of capitalism.”¹¹ Quite to the contrary the European Commission proposes “economic growth ... decoupled from resource use.”¹² Under these conditions climate change is bound to continue and lead to catastrophic conditions in the most exposed regions of the globe contributing the least to the greenhouse gas emissions. An adequate response to this crisis can only be conceived and carried out at this level under global government, perhaps the precondition to implement socio-ecological transformation.

¹¹ Introduction, p. 2.

¹² Proposal, p. 9.