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Climate Change, Poverty and the Green New Deal

Intro

The last international climate conferences were total disappointing. This is the evaluation shared by all those who have been involved with climate change issues for years. But why have these conferences been perceived that negatively, when conferences often end with unsatisfying results?

Some people say that climate conferences are just another example of the incompetence of politicians to solve complex issues. Ore more tough-minded: they are the proof of inability of politics at all. One should rather rely on economics than on politics, when the development of humankind is concerned.

In my opinion, this is a fatal false estimation. For when it comes to climate issues, we are not dealing with any ordinary political problem. It comes down to the most fundamental question humanity can ask itself: The question about their own survival on the only planet, which they can inhabit. This “species question” is dealing with the natural preconditions of human livelihood. It was raised about forty years ago and emerged to a holistic approach of ecological- political thinking. The species question does not only constitute a problem concerning certain groups, classes or individuals, it identifies a problem which concerns human race in its entirety. It deals with the natural environment necessary to the social and natural species, which calls itself Homo sapiens. Sapiens means wise. Can this being, that we have grown to be so fond of, survive on earth in the long term, or is it rather working persistently towards destroying its own conditions for survival?

If it wants to live on, we must ask ourselves in a political sense, what it must do in order to harmonise its way of living with the conditions given by nature and to harmonise inner and outer nature. How people have to produce, trade, consume; in short, reorganize their metabolism to be in tune with nature, thereby ensuring their means of existence forever?

Just a short time ago there were strong powers who wished to simply remove this issue from the table. Climate change was disclaimed; scenarios of catastrophes were ridiculed. At best, evasive measures that humanity could take if the Earth ever became too crowded were considered - maybe looking to the moon, mars or undiscovered planets. The time of such suppression on the issue is over. Nevertheless no active solution seems to be within reach. But why is this?

For me the main reason for not being able to find a satisfying solution lies in the interests of certain social groups and classes. It is known from sociological research into the behaviour of individuals with regard to common goods, that most people, both abstractly and noncommittally, follow an ethical norm, which dictates that everyone is obligated to contribute to the composition of the community. But everyone expects others to contribute first and also more, meanwhile hoping to benefit from the lower costs that this creates for himself. Whether this is a part of human nature or an influence from a highly stylized ideology of competition and rivalry, may be judged by anthropologists. But we can be sure: such behaviour will certainly lead to downfall, be it sooner or later.

Now, which are the interests and attitudes standing in the way of solving the species question? I see four major complexes:

One: the self- realization-interest of capital

Two: the immediate life-fears of the poorer groups

Three: an unreasonable mass consciousness

Four: the operational problems of politics.

Capital

So, where is the responsibility of capital? Capital is, by definition, money that proliferates itself. Money, that's function it is to increase itself by any means necessary. The self-realization- process of capital is blind to the material side of economics. It is not interested in which material, energy, financial and human resources are involved; whether they are demanded in excess or even damaged. The only interest is to meet benchmarks, to make numbers looking more and more promising and to accelerate the accumulation. It is assumed in theory, that this process will bring permanent prosperity to an always increasing number of people.

Coming from this, the dominating economic and political strategy is global economic growth. This is understood as an eternal source for progress and development. However, in light of the upcoming environmental crisis this paradigm is more than questionable.

A global thinking in terms of growth is in principle incompatible with ecological thinking. Any strategy for growth will want to maximise the exploitation of materials. Political ecology in contrary wants to prevent that. The first basic principle of political ecology is that global growth must not be the goal of macroeconomics. The assumption of economic growth being conducive to a higher quality of life is a false belief. The accumulation of growth does not only include productive and value-adding economic processes but also the opposite, destruction and reconstruction: for example the production of carbon dioxide as well as the need to repair damages caused by this stuff. The more catastrophes there are, the higher the rate of economic growth. Such an economic calculation is simply perverse mathematics.

It is a similar situation in business administration. Competition forces businesses to develop strategies, which often pay no regard to the environment, in order to reach the targets of their own growth calculations. Many companies are trying to be more sustainable and environmentally aware during production, but are limited due to the constant pressure of competing.

Let's take a look at the automobile industry for example.-

For a long time this industry has refused to accept the necessity of manufacturing environmentally friendly cars. In league with the oil industry, they were leading the fight against climate protection. The more resources used, the higher their return. But now, under pressure from politicians and consumers, a competition for the reduction of CO₂ and gas emissions has begun, which at first glance seems to be a move in a positive direction. Indeed, a green car is much better than a notorious polluter. But at the same time less green cars would be better than more green cars. This demonstrates the businesses dilemma. They have to think of an environmentally friendly alternative. However, what they can improve in terms of quality, they undo by increasing quantity. To be able to compete they have to deliver as many cars as possible. Or even worse, when the market is saturated they have to create a need for

people to buy not only one but the equivalent to one car and a half instead: SUVs for the city. An SUV might produce as little CO₂ emissions and consume as few gas as possible, but the bigger mass it contains, the more energy it requires to work; the more ecological costs there are in production; and it requires more energy to recycle than a smaller car would. This is without even considering the ecological costs of land use in congested cities. And what are we supposed to think of a company boasting with slogans of sustainability when its employees are free to pick any company car they want? The consequence is packs of fancy dinosaurs roaming the streets.

Labour and Poor

Let us now move from capital to labour and the poor. To those who wake up each morning not knowing how they are going to feed their children that day; who do not know where they are going to find the money to pay the rent and heating bills; who worry about their income prospects; who may not have learned how to deal with more complex problems, due to either lack of education or their own bigotry – these persons spend the whole day thinking about everything subject under the sun, but not about how he can relieve the pressures on the environment. The poor strata only engage themselves in solving societal problems, if it means their own difficulties are being addressed in the same process. This is the case on both a domestic and an international level.

For years, industrialised countries have been using their own economic and consumer models as the archetype for industrialisation in other countries. We now know, however, that if all countries followed the western production and consumer models, then it wouldn't be long until the earth was completely ecologically overburdened. In climate negotiations we experienced how the developing countries demanded financial compensation from the developed countries for not destructively depleting their own resources as much as the industrial countries did during their own periods of rapid growth

It is only fair for developing countries to demand that their renunciation of a similar lifestyle and a comparable way of production is rewarded by the industrialised nations. This is not just an ethical imperative and a question of justice, but rather an

imperative of rationality and reasoning. Countries, whose citizens fight for survival and have such immediate worries, cannot accurately perceive future problems, let alone tackle them effectively. When the goal is to create a community of global economic responsibility, then a negotiated balance of interests between North and South, including the policies of trade, finance and investment, is inevitable. However, it is also right that the elites of the third-world and the emerging markets, which demand financial support from the North, are required to demonstrate good governance and transparency to the international community, showing that the provisions that are allocated to them are ecologically and responsibly used.

Even in the western-industrialised societies there are portions of the population whose own precarious situation is more pressing than the necessity of rescuing the planet. This can even lead to a cynical attitude: 'If I don't have enough to eat, then all the others shall perish, too.' There can only be one conclusion drawn from this: the ecological species question cannot be answered without a solution for the social question. Only when the poorer classes are relieved from the immediate difficulties in their lives, can they have the opportunity to get involved in a common ecological policy. This requires not only smart intellectuals and enlightened scientists, but also a societal majority and a mass consciousness, which push for appropriate political decisions.

Mass Consciousness

At the beginning of the ecological movement, activists were ridiculed and disdained. The greens were considered as huggy tree-huggers and to be a small, crazy subculture of hillbillies. And indeed, many of them isolated themselves from society. Whoever personally wanted to implement all environmental standards by 100 percent, was in danger, to become a type of medieval peasant. And most mainstream-people did not want to be permanently confronted by self-appointed saints, who tried to make them aware of their own ecological deficiency. But the burlesque of some few ecologists must not be the alibi for the mainstream, not to change their lifestyles. It appears to me, that if the majority of people improve their environment related behaviour by only 50 percent, it has a better impact than a few people doing everything with 150 percent commitment. Indeed, a lot of the things that once belonged to the ridiculed 'alternative' lifestyle are today part of the mainstream-

culture: Healthy food for example as an alternative to gravy topped beef loaded all American cheese burgers with chips.

The behaviour of individuals has to change. But the question is whether this will be a precondition or a consequence of ecological policy. There for instance would be no use, if I personally – in order to save energy - regulated in summertime the air conditioning in my home down to 23 centigrade when next-door in the office tower it needs to be 18 centigrade so that those in the business world can present themselves in suits and ties. When they are used as an excuse to be entitled to waste energy, business suits, the symbols of reliability and professionalism, are turning into the badge of irresponsibility.

The question of personal lifestyle needs to be addressed in a different way. If politics sets a new ecological framework for economics and moves away from a quantitative growth approach, also concerning the maximisation of consumption, this will have an impact on the lifestyle of individuals, the private as well as the public. The accepting by society will change. Status symbols which are still recognised as an indicator of success and position and which evolved from materialistic thinking, are increasingly considered ridiculous and bordering on antisocial.

The consequences for one's own life would be to accept that cutbacks in insanely excessive consumerism and competitive swank must be made. This is not to advocate poverty ethics, in the same way that the overused saying: 'Wealth for all' is hardly tenable. One's own feelings of prosperity and well-being will not dwindle as much, if one follows the old ecological principle: 'small is beautiful', or to use a new-German term: 'downsizing'. Getting a smaller model of car, turning the heating down one centigrade, using the 'off' rather than 'standby' setting, travelling by train or bus more than by plane or car, upgrading the mobile every two years rather than every year – such maneuvers won't kill us. In effect we are parting from status symbols, not as a consequence of ethics of renouncement, but rather as necessary result of an ecologically aligned economy. Non-material values will replace material values.

The overall concepts and ideologies also need to change. The materialistic thinking of Neo-Liberalism described the character of people in the modern world as 'profit

maximising economic agents', interested in nothing else than the private material benefit. Making money and maximising consumption is made from this device. Those who favour non-material values are looked down upon smugly and arrogantly as people who work on their 'human perfection'. But the very people who see themselves as the elite, setting the so called business culture as common standard, are the same who with their selfishness almost brought the world economy to the edge of abyss. When finally persons are be seen as elites and leaders, who understand community not as an arena for the survival of the fittest but as a community of responsibility and solidarity? We have to redefine the term of elite!

Policies

Policies have regulation problems. The big question is whether our parties, whether our leadership and whether the institutions, which developed in a time of industrial and overall growth, have the ability to organise a different kind of economy. Whoever supposes that the policies must be further deregulated because the economy will sort itself out, must be said that he deals with the problems from yesterday. The future problems of an ecological dimension are only solvable by more investing in the policy making process, more regulations and more international regimes. In order to avoid a situation in which politics has to suddenly enact an emergency law, because environmental crises result in catastrophes, migration influxes and armed conflicts, it is necessary for today's society that the various interest groups and societal layers agree on a common framework of norms and set of instruments. It is not only a question of environmental but also of security policy.

I personally belong to the group of people, who in the late 1980s suggested creating a new society treaty, a treaty on ecology and social solidarity, discussed currently under the new title 'Green New Deal'. On one hand the social question needs to be answered. Since we cannot finance this task by economic growth – for ecological reasons it is not preferable – it has to be financed by a redistribution of existing wealth. This goes along with charge on the affluent people by for instance higher income and luxury tax. The taxation of use of natural resources for claiming revenues for public investments into ecological infrastructure, which bring labour and into pension funds, which diminish the costs of labour for companies and the employees, are also to be discussed. There is no other way around this.

On the other hand middle class and richer people want to get guarantees for the quality of life, for fresh air, clear water, non-contaminated soil, freedom and peace – values which are principally shared also by poorer people. If their existential problems are reduced by social redistribution as described, then they are free to support the middle classes in saving the planet and the natural conditions of human life. In this way also the major desires of affluent people can be fulfilled. That's their benefit of the deal. You can't find a cheaper way for finding a solution for the species question of human race.

For years we have experienced a boom in environmental technologies. Generating clean and renewable energy instead of using fossil fuels and atomic power is an important political goal. A growing market has developed in this field. Germany belongs to the leading forces. However, environmental technology which only serves under the paradigm of growth is not the long term solution. Growth must not be defined as an economic aim, it only can occur as a result, a result of ecological and social policies, which try to keep the natural and social balance. Business strategies, which postpone the exploitation in order to adorn their own figures, are the problem, not the solution. When we are developing renewable energies on one hand, at the same time the market for fossil fuels and other mineral resources should shrink. Growing and shrinking – we need political benchmarks as a framework for business strategies, how the 'Club of Rome' demanded almost 40 years ago, when he discovered the 'limits of growth'.

From all this, it seems to me that the terms of progress and richness need to be redefined. Indicators as the gross domestic product or export quotas, expressing the ideology of quantitative growth as an end goal, are historically outdated. Other indicators such as the UN's favoured human development index seem to be more meaningful. Although here the northern industrialised countries are leading, too, the numbers don't correlate a hundred percent with their economic strength. The USA for instance, the country which by far has the highest amount of energy consumption per capita, ranges on 13th place in human development. Energy consumption does not appear to be the key to luck and happiness. But the UN-index, however progressive it is, does not illustrate to what extent poverty is connected with the wealth of others or demonstrate the relation between quality of life and the quality of the environment.

Let us look back: The 'stability-and-growth-law' of the 1970s in West Germany created a balance of growth, employment, budget stability and interest rates. The environment played no role. This was one important reason for founding the green party. The same happens in general within the neoclassical 'factor of production theory'. Beside capital and labour nature is considered only as a cheaply exploitable resource. Meanwhile the awareness that nature must also have its price has grown. The Kyoto protocol tried it by initiating trade with CO2 certificates. Eco-tax in European countries is trying to do something similar. So there is some beginning. But where is the economic theory that really integrates the value of nature and environment, a holistic theory of economy which reflects on quality of human life instead of quantity of figures? Following proposals and pressures of greens and ecologists a few weeks ago the German parliament constituted a special commission which shall find qualitative indicators which are capable to replace the GDP-calculations – an important step forwards.

I come to my conclusion:

We have to distinguish the terms of growth and development. It is not the same. Let us say goodbye to the term of quantitative growth and let us discuss about a new term of qualitative development.

This is my proposal. The general formula could be:

***We
work
corporately
on approximating
chances and quality of life
amongst all people in the world
on the highest level as possible,
while respecting the ecological capacity of our globe.***

This term of qualitative development reflects the idea of ecological humanism, the idea of a green new deal. It takes into account the constraints of growth, the idea of an ecological- social contract of society, as well as the national and international

dimension. Even if it sounds abstract, this formula contains regulative ideas that can become directly political on a practical basis. Even if the goal seems to be very ambitious: I am afraid that if we do not move towards this direction, the species question, the question of our survival as human race, cannot be answered. That would be a pity, because we human beings are amazing and lovely creatures.