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Ecology

A critique of the ecosocialist manifesto of the Parti de Gauche

- Features -

Publication date: Sunday 24 March 2013

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Daniel Tanuro is the author of *L'impossible capitalisme vert* ("the impossible green capitalism"). In this article, he presents an analysis of the Ecosocialist Manifesto of the French Left Party. Highlighting the real advances contained in this document, but also its limitations, he contributes to the crucial debate on the necessary ecosocialist strategy

The Ecosocialist Manifesto of the Left Party (PG) is an important document. For the first time in France, a political force with parliamentary representation adopts the concept of ecosocialism to try and combine social and ecological demands, in a perspective of a break with capitalism. The condemnation of productivism is unambiguous. The fact that the document rejects as socially unjust and environmentally criminal the social democratic strategy of relaunching the system (Thesis 6: "We therefore expect neither the resumption of growth nor the beneficial effects of austerity: we believe in neither the one or the other") demonstrates an awareness of the seriousness of the situation and the urgency of the measures that must be taken to confront it. That is to say that the manifesto contributes to a fundamental political debate: what alternative to co-management of capitalism by the Greens and social-liberalism? What programme, what vision of society, what strategy for an anti-productivist socialism?

This debate has only just begun. The Left, in order to deepen it, would benefit from further immersing itself in environmental problems, the scale of which it scarcely grasps. In this respect, the progress made by the Left Party since its founders left the Socialist Party is remarkable. However, in my opinion the point has not yet been reached where the activists could take cognizance of the immensity of the challenges. The road that remains to be travelled can be measured, among other things, by the fact that the PG Ecosocialist Manifesto considers technology as socially neutral (Thesis 13: "The problem is not the technique itself but rather the lack of choice and of citizens' control"... as if the hypothesis of "socialist nuclear power" was possible!) and says nothing about biofuels, shale gas or carbon capture and sequestration. But our main criticism is that the PG does not come out for the abandonment of fossil fuels and does not confront frankly some major constraints of the transition towards a system entirely based on renewable energies. In fact, despite all the excellent things that it contains, the manifesto of the PG does not seem to grasp the formidable scale of the energy/climate challenge that must be taken up in the next forty years and which is in my opinion the main reason why ecosocialism is a burning necessity.

The basic elements of the problem

We cannot repeat often enough the basic elements of the problem: beyond an increase in temperature of 1.5 Å° C compared to the pre-industrial era, the warming of the lower atmosphere will more than likely lead to irreversible ecological and social catastrophes. The disaster-making machine is already en route – we can see it in the multiplication of extreme weather events. But the worst – in particular a rise of from one to three metres in the level of the oceans, involving the displacement in the relatively short term of hundreds of millions of people - can still be avoided. However, to have a chance of the increase in temperature remaining below 2.4 Å° C, the conditions that need to be met are draconian: it means that the developed countries almost entirely abandon fossil fuels by 2050 and that global greenhouse gas emissions decrease by 50 to 85 per cent by that date, to be reduced to zero before 2100 (by that point, in fact, they should even begin to be negative, which means that the ecosystem of the Earth should absorb more carbon dioxide than it emits). Renewable energies can take over from there. Their technical potential is more than sufficient. But the transition is extremely complicated because it is a question, in a very short period of time, of replacing the existing energy system by another, completely different and much more expensive.

Change the energy system

The elements that have to be taken into consideration are the following:

– If we refuse nuclear technology – we have to refuse it, for many reasons that I will not go into here – and if we respect the principle of the common but differentiated responsibilities of countries = this must be respected, for obvious reasons of North/South justice = then it follows that the success of the transition to renewable energy makes it necessary to reduce final energy demand by around half in the European Union and by three quarters in the United States;

– A reduction of this magnitude is not possible through energy-saving measures alone. A reduction in material production and transport is also indispensable. It is therefore not enough to balance the removal of productions that are useless or harmful, on the one hand, and the increase in ecological products, on the other hand: the balance of the whole must be negative;

– The objectives in terms of emissions mean that approximately 80 per cent of the known reserves of coal, oil and natural gas must remain in the ground. But these reserves are the property of capitalist companies, or state capitalist companies; they appear as assets on their balance sheets. Their non-exploitation would amount to a destruction of capital. This would be unacceptable to shareholders, it goes without saying;

– With few exceptions, renewable energies are more expensive than fossil fuels and will remain so, roughly speaking, for the next two decades. In practice, the main effect of the increase in the price of oil is to make profitable the exploitation of tar sands, shale gas, heavy oils and deep offshore wells, all profitable businesses from the capitalist point of view but highly destructive from the environmental point of view, and whose energy efficiency (the ratio between the input and the output of energy) is often very low.

– Overall, the transition to renewable energy has not begun. The United Nations make the following observation: "The change in energy technology has slowed down considerably on the level of the global energy mix since the 1970s, and there is no evidence in support of the popular idea that this change in energy technology is accelerating. (...) Despite impressive growth rates of the dissemination of renewable energy technologies since 2000, it is clear that the current trajectory does not come anywhere near a realistic path towards a total decarbonization of the global energy system by 2050" (UN, *World Economic and Social Outlook 2011*, pp 49-50).

– One of the reasons for this situation - which contrasts with the image portrayed by the media - is that the fully rational use of renewable energy requires the construction of an alternative energy system, completely new, decentralized, efficient and equipped with storage facilities. In the framework of the present centralized and wasteful system, 1GW of wind power requires the backup of 0.9 GW of fossil energy: renewables only add to traditional energies. To avoid this combination means building an "intelligent" network in ten years. An undertaking that would be "gigantic, necessitating technological progress, international cooperation and unprecedented transfers" (ibid., p. 52).

The obstacle of Capital

The economic, and therefore political and social implications of changing the energy system are well summarized by the same United Nations report: "Overall, the cost of replacing the existing fossil and nuclear infrastructure is at least 15 to 20,000 billion dollars [between a quarter and a third of global GDP – DT]. China alone increased its production

of coal-fired electrical power by more than 300 GW between 2000 and 2008, an investment of more than \$300 billion, which will begin to be profitable from 2030-2040 and will operate perhaps until 2050-2060. In fact, most of the energy infrastructures have been deployed recently in emerging economies and are completely new, with lifetimes of at least 40 to 60 years. Clearly, it is unlikely that the world (sic) will decide overnight to wipe out 15 to 20,000 billion dollars of infrastructures and replace them with a renewable energy system which is more expensive"(UN, *World Economic and Social Outlook 2011*, p. 53).

If it was consulted and adequately informed of the issues, "the world" would undoubtedly decide to replace the fossil system with a renewable system. But the capitalist states will not take this decision, even though they are informed of the issues. Generally speaking, they are absolutely incapable of finding in forty years a humanly acceptable solution to the tangle of problems outlined above. The law of profit prevents it. No carbon tax, no emission rights market will bring a solution. To have a chance of being effective, the level of taxes or rights should increase to 600 or 700 dollars per ton of CO₂ in areas such as transport, which is obviously inconceivable. All the key sectors of the economy (automotive, aerospace, shipbuilding, chemical and petrochemical, power generation, steel, cement, food, etc.) would be heavily penalized. To believe that the bosses of the enterprises concerned will accept that we impinge on their profit margins, to believe that the rival states representing these bosses will agree to simultaneously impinge on the profit margins of all bosses in all countries, is to believe in Santa Claus. The failure for 20 years (twenty years!) of the international summits on the climate provides ample proof of it. And this will not change in the context of the competition wars that have been raging since 2008!

A triple catastrophe

No doubt is possible: in the framework of the system, we are heading quickly towards a triple disaster - ecological, social and technological. This last aspect emerges clearly from the scenarios developed by the International Energy Agency and adopted, with variations, by the OECD, the World Bank, the UNEP and other international institutions. In order to try and reconcile capitalist growth with climate targets, without changing the energy system, all of these organizations in fact put forward the same combinations of proposals (the same "energy mix"): triple the number of nuclear power stations; increase the use of coal, tar sands and shale gas; considerably increase the production of biofuels; in general increase the use of biomass, especially by having recourse to genetically modified plants - in particular trees... It should be noted that these scenarios, if they were implemented, would at best make it possible to limit the concentration in CO₂ equivalent to 550 parts per million (ppm), which corresponds to a temperature increase of between 2.8 and 3.2 °C... Unacceptable!

In all these cases, carbon capture and sequestration is presented as the Columbus's egg which will make it possible to continue the combustion of fossil fuels without the quantities of carbon dioxide produced being sent into the atmosphere. In reality, there is good reason to fear that the massive deployment over the long term of this technology is a new solution of the sorcerer's apprentice kind, a way of sweeping rubbish under the carpet. Generally speaking, ecosocialists should oppose it... except possibly in the clearly limited context of conversion plans for workers in certain polluting enterprises that are destined to close. We should note that it is precisely this technology that is involved in the ULCOS project in Florange. This case illustrates the difficulty of the concrete articulation of social and environmental questions in the ultra-defensive context of today...

Growth, non-growth, de-growth

From the ecological point of view, the main weakness of the manifesto of the PG is, in our view, that it does not tackle head-on this formidable question of the energy transition and of capitalist policy on the issue. It is not enough

to challenge "the relaunching of GDP growth" (Thesis 6), or to juxtapose "the necessary reduction of certain kinds of material consumption and the need to relaunch certain activities" (Thesis 10): it must go further and admit that, at least in developed capitalist countries, a net decrease in material production and transport is essential to make the transition successfully and avoid an irreversible transformation of the environment, with catastrophic social consequences.

What "green rule"?

It is true that the manifesto links the "relaunch of certain activities" with "taking systematic account of the carbon footprint that is generated". Incorporating a central theme of the presidential campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the document proposes introducing the "green rule" as "central indicator for directing the economy". The explanation is as follows (Thesis 10): "In addition to the damage already done, and which we have to make up for as regards greenhouse gas emissions and loss of biodiversity, we adopt as a means of evaluation of public policies, the fixing at a later date every year the day of 'global overtaking'. This is the date when we have calculated on a global level the volume of renewable resources equal to what the planet is capable of regenerating and when we have produced waste that it is capable of digesting. Our goal is to push this date back to December 31, i.e. to neutralize our carbon footprint. This implies the drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the cessation of nuclear power, which produces waste that nobody knows how to deal with".

The drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the cessation of nuclear power were not mentioned in the first version of this text, submitted last December to the Conference on Ecosocialism. The inclusion of these amendments is very positive, but nevertheless unsatisfactory. Firstly, because the text does not go beyond the objective, not budgeted for and rather vague, of "reducing our dependence on exhaustible resources" (Thesis 9). Secondly, because "the global ecological footprint" is a questionable indicator, with no real practical significance:

– Questionable, because by amalgamating the calculations of renewable and non-renewable resources in relation to the population, the footprint gives a biased image of being unsustainable. It dilutes the major responsibility of fossil fuels (about 80 per cent of the footprint results from the combustion of these fuels) and thus diverts attention from the coal, oil and gas lobbies. On the other hand, it draws attention to the question of population, which is the hobby horse of the neo-Malthusians;

– With no real practical significance, because the sustainability of the ecological footprint "on a world scale" only commits the government of a particular country if it is translated into national objectives that are specific, measurable, and verifiable in terms of the historical responsibility of the country considered in the context of the "global ecological crisis". However, this translation into national objectives is not so simple to achieve.

To deal with the emergency by adopting a "green rule" is certainly an idea to be retained, but the chosen indicator must be relevant, clear, measurable and verifiable. The ecological footprint strikes the imagination ("we would need three planets!") but also creates a lot of confusion. It would be better to adopt a law stipulating that, while abandoning nuclear power, and without resorting to "carbon credits", France will decrease every year its fossil emissions of CO₂ in a proportion such that the country reaches a minimum of 80 to 95 per cent by 2050, passing through an intermediate stage of 25 to 40 per cent by 2020 (compared to 1990)... and aiming at more than 100 per cent (i.e. negative emissions) between 2050 and 2100.

Internationalism: try a little harder!

The adoption of such a law is one of the means par excellence by which France - or any other developed capitalist country - can "fulfill its responsibility to humanity by effacing the ecological debt". But it is not the only way. In this regard, many important and accurate things are said in Thesis 17 about the international dimension of ecosocialism ("conduct an internationalist and universalist combat"). However, the text fails to deal with the main problem: how to reconcile climate stabilization with the right to development of the peoples of the South? The challenge, let us repeat, is quite simply gigantic. On the one hand, three billion human beings are suffering because their basic needs are not satisfied, or insufficiently so: it is necessary to produce more. On the other, the climate constraints that must be respected between now and 2050 prohibit massively relaunching material production on a global level, and even dictate that it should be reduced in developed countries.

What is the way out? No one can decently claim to have the definitive answer. It is, however, insufficient to write that you are "contributing to the discussions aimed at combining development policies and social progress and the preservation of the environment" and that you support the approach of the "Yasuni ITT initiative". The PG recognizes "the responsibility of what are called the countries of the North, and of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, towards the peoples of the South". It should draw some programmatic conclusions from that: in addition to the unilateral adoption by France of a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, other measures would be, for example, to cancel the debt, not to import biofuels, to recognize the right to food sovereignty, to denounce REDD +, to make free transfers of green technologies and to pay – in the form of aid, not loans! – for adaptation to climate change. These few measures seem to me to be essential elements of a consistent ecosocialist internationalism.

Transitional strategy

The scientific reports on "global change" bear witness: the energy/climate challenge is the major environmental and social problem major which mankind must face up to. It is starting from this central question that the ecosocialists must jointly develop a programme, a strategy, tactics and forms of struggle. This is not about taking ideological postures, outbidding the PG by purism or being more radical than it by virtue of sacred dogmas. It is about taking the measure of the extreme gravity of the objective situation and soberly drawing the political conclusions that flow from it. These conclusions can only be radically anti-capitalist and internationalist. It is the very foundations of the mode of production which are in question. The manifesto of the PG also says so, and it is in this framework that the debate can take place.

How should we act? The strategic difficulty resides in the yawning abyss between the urgent need for an (eco)socialist alternative and the current level of consciousness of the populations, in particular the exploited and oppressed. It is to bridge this gap, to build a bridge across this abyss, that it is important to respond to both social demands and environmental emergencies through a programme of demands that makes it possible to begin to break from the existing order. It seems obvious that this programme must set the perspective of the formation of a government capable of implementing it - at the national, European and global levels. But the formation of a government should not justify lowering the level of the programme to the point where it would no longer make such a break possible. It is doubtful whether there is agreement on this point when we remember that Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a few days before the Conference on Ecosocialism, declared that he was a candidate for the post of Prime Minister of a government of the Left with the Socialist Party and the Greens...

Expropriation of energy and finance

In its first version, the Manifesto of the PG demanded the nationalization of energy, but not of finance. This deficiency

has been corrected. It is to be welcomed because the expropriation of the lobbies of these two closely interlinked sectors is really a condition sine qua non for the break. It provides a framework within which can be articulated a series of ecosocialist demands, large and small, ranging from the creation of public municipal boards for the insulation and renovation of housing to free transport, including along the way encouraging proximity organic farming, the prohibition of planned obsolescence, free services (water, electricity, mobility, heating) up to a level corresponding to basic needs (with rapidly progressive pricing beyond that level), the retraining of employees of polluting enterprises, with maintenance of their seniority and benefits, the generalized reduction of working time to 30 hours a week without loss of pay, etc. Outside of this framework, the programme loses its coherence and breaks down into a series of scattered measures, some of which are digestible by the system, others not.

A government that would commit itself to implementing a programme for a break with the system worthy of the name would be immediately confronted with the response of the international bourgeoisie, especially through the European Union. It would have to protect its policies from it. Not in the name of the nation, but in the name of another Europe that has to be built, a Europe of which its policies would give a foretaste to other peoples. Although the manifesto has been improved on this point (Thesis 16: "Although the European level may be relevant for major environmental and social policies, their implementation would only be possible by the building of another Europe, under the democratic control of the peoples"), there should be an even more offensive approach, pointing to the need for a constituent assembly of the peoples of Europe. Because it is only on the level of the subcontinent that an ecosocialist programme worthy of the name can be deployed. Through the establishment of European public services of energy, water, transportation, housing. Through a reorientation of research and industry towards the needs of these services. Through joint management of natural resources.

Self-management or statism?

The manifesto of the PG is right to conclude (Thesis 18) that "given the magnitude of its objective, challenging the capitalist production model cannot result from a simple electoral alternation and from decisions from above". Indeed, such a challenge is only possible through an in-depth social mobilization. A mobilization of everyone, regardless of their philosophical and religious beliefs. This point probably merits discussion. For us, there is for example no reason that participation in the ecosocialist combat should be subject to the acceptance of secularism as understood by the PG. This condition goes against the necessary and urgent unity against imminent catastrophes. The management of the Earth's ecosystem "in a responsible fashion" is compatible with the humanist foundations of all religions, of all cosmologies. Provided that they are fighting for demands which emancipate men and women in practice - on Earth, not in heaven - it matters little whether those involved believe in God or not.

The key point is that this mobilization should be coupled with democratic self-organization. Imposing workers' control in the workplaces, electing strike committees, occupying workplaces when there is a strike, forming residents' committees that determine themselves the criteria and the priorities of municipalities, encouraging mass struggles against crazy technological projects (such as Notre Dame des Landes), encouraging everywhere direct links between producers and consumers to escape from the mediation of capital and of the market, supporting the autonomous struggles of women and of all the oppressed: this is the road we should take.

The manifesto of the PG takes important steps in this direction, referring to "the ongoing intervention of workers in the management of enterprises" and to "conferences of popular participation to redefine the criteria for social and environmental utility and the articulation between the different levels" of "ecological planning" (Thesis 13). But these proposals would benefit from being made more precise because, generally speaking, the perspective of the manifesto is more statist and centralist than it is decentralized and based on self-management. It ignores the class nature of the state, adorns the Republic with virtues that it does not possess and presents, so to speak, a "top-down" conception of socialist emancipation (Thesis 4: "the emancipation of the human person requires the sharing of

wealth, the democratization of power and global education”).

The road ahead is long and difficult, full of pitfalls. It is the road of an anti-capitalist alternative. “For a long time the world has had the dream of something that it only needed to become conscious of to actually possess”, said Marx. This thing today is ecosocialism, the dream of a humanity which will collectively maintain the garden of the Earth with joy, prudence and responsibility. There is neither shortcut nor supreme saviour. The consciousness of the concrete possibility of this thing can only be forged in action based on solidarity, in the struggle without borders against this absurd system, which bears within it the ecological and social catastrophe as the storm-cloud bears the thunderstorm.

[1] Paris, La Découverte, 2010