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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

SEPTEMBER 6, 2018

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07.09.2018

Climate Change: What About the Marxists?



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Author John Steinbeck in 1962 asked, “Why must progress look so much like destruction?” (1) In fact, ever-expanding production of things – progress, in other words – promotes destruction in the form of climate change. Perpetrators of boundless production dominate in our governments and society, and so climate change has advanced. The story might have been different had capitalism never existed.

Cuban president Fidel Castro said as much on June 12, 1992. He was addressing the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – known as the “Earth Summit” – in Rio de Janeiro.

Castro declared that, “An important biological species — humankind— is at risk of disappearing due to the rapid and progressive elimination of its natural habitat. We are becoming aware of this problem when it is almost too late to prevent it.” He mentioned that “consumer societies ... consume two-thirds of all metals and three-fourths of the energy produced worldwide. They have poisoned the seas and the rivers ... They have saturated the atmosphere with gases, altering climatic conditions with the catastrophic effects we are already beginning to suffer ... Tomorrow will be too late to do what we should have done a long time ago.”

At the Earth Summit that day, 154 nations signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Now, however, “the Earth System may be approaching a planetary threshold that could lock in a continuing rapid pathway toward much hotter conditions—Hothouse Earth. This pathway would be propelled by strong, intrinsic, biogeophysical feedbacks difficult to influence by human actions.” This was according to a scientific paper published August 6 by the National Academy of Sciences.

Headlines across the world signaled alarm. For example: “Even If Emission Reduction Targets Are Met, Earth Still Heading Towards ‘Hothouse’ State” (Huffington Post); “We may be close to runaway climate change, a new paper warns” (ZME Science); “Earth risks tipping into irreversible ‘hothouse’ state due to fossil fuel use: study” (The Japan Times); “Climate Change may become unstoppable within decades” (The Times of London).

In her [Silent Spring](#) (1962), Rachel Carson reported that disturbance of the balance of nature by humans had led to disaster. Left to itself, nature imposes limits within which feedback and recycling mechanisms are at work and there’s interdependency of species. Rachel Carson revealed that the indiscriminate use of pesticides had disrupted biological processes and poisoned humans, animal species, and the land.

Elsewhere she touched upon human responsibility: “The modern world worships the gods of speed and quantity and of the quick and easy profit, and out of this idolatry monstrous evils have arisen.” (2)

The burning of carbon-containing fuels has released gases that, accumulating in the atmosphere, have undermined equilibrium between their heat-retaining properties and conditions favoring life. In their valuable book [What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism](#) (Monthly Review Press), Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster note that, “Climate change ... is only one of a number of planetary rifts brought on by the crossing of planetary boundaries.” Capitalism, they say, “recognizes no limits to its own

self expansion – there is no amount of profit, no amount of wealth, and no amount of consumption that is either ‘enough’ or ‘too much.’”

A recent article occupying the entire New York Times Sunday Magazine brought the discussion to a larger audience. The title was “Losing Earth.” Author Nathaniel Rich reports that between 1979 and 1989, consensus had developed in high government and scientific circles that the problem was serious. He recounts scientific conferences and reports, oil- company involvement, a couple of congressional hearings, several front-page New York Times headlines. Everyone involved agreed action was necessary. Then in 1989, as Rich reports, things collapsed.

That year high officials of dozens of countries met in the Netherlands under the auspices of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They couldn’t agree on reducing carbon emissions. As disappointed delegates were leaving their last meeting, a U.S. reporter asked a Swedish delegate, “What’s happening?” “Your government is fucking this thing up” was the answer.

Beyond his unsatisfactory mention of “human nature,” Rich doesn’t identify causes of the debacle. Even so, his article offers bits of information hinting at an explanation.

By 1988 the U.S. government at the executive level appeared to be moving toward a plan for reducing emissions. At that point, however, White House officials tried to censure scientific testimony – even that of prestigious climate scientist James Hanson. They did send a U.S. delegation to the Netherlands meeting, but only to exert U.S. “leadership.” Oil company scientists were no longer cooperating. Exxon henceforth would “emphasize the uncertainty in scientific conclusions.” Capitalism was in charge.

Rich’s narrative suggests that the 10-year process was in the hands of a small band of insiders: a few scientists (including one from Exxon), members of government commissions and advisory boards, a couple of congressmen, and environmental activist and publicist Rafe Pomerance, who had “charisma.” The lack of public participation and leadership suggests a deficit of democracy.

Naomi Klein and others took Rich to task. In a widely circulated article, she points out that “the late ’80s was the absolute zenith of the neoliberal crusade, a moment of peak ideological ascendancy for the economic and social project that deliberately set out to vilify collective action.” Rich, she says, was oblivious to this.

Klein was returning to the theme of her well known book [This Changes Everything](#) (2014). There she blamed capitalists for allowing climate change to advance.

Praising the worldwide anti-capitalist campaigns of local activists, social movements, and indigenous peoples, she shied away from a socialist alternative.

Later, in responding to Rich, she declares that, “humanity’s best shot at collective survival” lies with “a new form of democratic eco-socialism, with the humility to learn from Indigenous teachings about the duties to future generations.” She adds that, “autocratic industrial socialism” was “a disaster for the environment.” One assumes that Klein rejects the model of revolutionary socialism founded in the 19th century by Marx and Engels.

Now the main point: because capitalism contributed to the advance of climate change, resistance to climate change must be anti-capitalist and on that account, socialist. Because it’s a high-stakes issue, human survival itself, a type of socialism is required whose theory and prescriptions aim at undoing rather than reforming capitalism.

Those are qualities peculiar to Marxism. Marxists see capitalism’s end being hastened by contradictions within. Climate change is such a contradiction. The call from Marx and Engels was for “Workers of the world [to] unite,” and, conveniently, climate change is a global phenomenon.

The hallmark for capitalists is their tendency to steal, beginning with the proceeds from labor. They expropriate land in order to profit from top soil or from what’s underneath. They’ve expropriated human bodies and their labor, and commandeered the rights of women and all those whom they view as disposable.

And the capitalists sacrifice the balance of nature for the sake of plunder. Karl Marx himself examined the rift between cities and the countryside coinciding with the industrial revolution. He discovered that traditional means for replenishing soil fertility had lost out to the use and abuse of land by capitalists dedicated to accumulation.

For Marxists, progressive change comes about through struggle between social classes. Climate change mostly threatens the survival of people who work or want to work. We think they are ready to struggle against the class of people who, intent upon profit-taking, have denied the existence of climate change or have impeded efforts to stop it or soften its effects.

Young people these days are attracted to socialism, according to reports. (3) Concerned about climate change, they are ripe for absorbing teachings of the Marxist movement. They will realize that halfway measures aren’t enough. Prominent eco-socialist Ian Angus writes, for example, that “Incremental linear changes to the present socioeconomic system are not enough to stabilize the Earth System. Widespread, rapid, and fundamental

transformations will likely be required.” He was commenting on the report published by the National Academy of Science, mentioned above.

Or, as Richard Smith of the Democratic Socialists of America suggests: “We can’t suppress emissions without closing down companies ... We need to socialize those companies, nationalize them, buy them out and take them into public hands.”

The challenge for Marxists is great. Environmental issues have never been at the top of their agenda in the United States. Their numbers are reduced and their organizations are small and often at odds with one another. But the future weighs heavily and it makes sense – really it’s imperative – for U.S. Marxists to take on the job of teaching and agitating on climate change, late though it may be. Resources are at hand, notably writers associated with Monthly Review, the Climate and Capitalism website, and the System Change Not Climate Change coalition.

This exercise ends with a lament that governments for, by, and of the people seem to be unengaged with the problem of human survival – and with a longing for revolutionary leadership in the mold of Fidel Castro.

Notes.

1. John Steinbeck, Travels with Charley: in Search of America,(Viking Press, NY, 1962),p. 181
2. Taken from Rachel Carson’s Preface to Animal Machines, by Ruth Harrison (1964)
3. See, for example, “The New Socialists,” The New York Times, August 26, 2018.