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Introduction »



Radical climate change politics in Copenhagen and beyond: From criticism to action?

Ulrich Brand, Nicola Bullard, Edgardo Lander and Tadzio Mueller

There is something uncanny about the politics of climate change. An issue at the same time old and new; omnipresent, yet easily forgotten; threatening the destruction of billions of lives, yet somehow relegated to a relatively obscure corner of the global political system, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a treaty organisation far less powerful than, say, the World Trade Organization (WTO). But whence the relatively sudden prominence of the issue, after languishing in the environmentalist doldrums for nearly two decades – is it 'really' because of the climate crisis, or are there other interests, other structures at work? And what can 'we', the global movements, global civil society, whatever name we give to ourselves, what can we do about the issue? These questions might not be resolved here, but we feel that it is important to start asking them.

Since public discussion of the issue began in earnest in the 1980s, climate change and its potential and real impacts have become more and more obvious. Not only the developments in scientific research, but also the activities of environmental movements,media, critical intellectuals, progressive state officials and alternative energy producers have focused social and political attention on the implications of the problem. With the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol, an international political mechanism to manage the issue was developed in the 1990s.



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In the last two years especially, climate change has climbed to the top of the political agenda. There are, of course, a multiplicity of reasons for this resurgence of an issue that has gone through alternating cycles of low and high public attention, but central among them are, no doubt, the publication of the Fourth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); of the Stern Report – whose message, crucial from the perspective of enlightened capital, is that it is cheaper to take action on climate change now than in the future, and that a 'green capitalism' might be possible; sky-high energy prices (recall that in 2007 and 2008, oil prices were touching the US$ 150 mark); and the argument that *peak oil*, that is, a peak in global oil discovery relative to demand, had been reached, after which prices would have to rise drastically. In the comparative political frenzy that followed, the IPCC and Al Gore were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, while G-8 summits in 2007 in Germany, in 2008 in Japan and in 2009 in Italy had the linked issues of energy and climate change high on their agendas. The UNFCCC summit in Bali in December 2007 was widely covered in the global mass media.

The climate summit in December 2009 in Copenhagen, the 'COP 15' (15th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC), will no doubt be a decisive moment – one way or the other – and everybody is gearing up for it. Global attention is guaranteed, and as a publicity stunt, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon initiated a 'global count-down to Copenhagen' on 24 September. The meeting will also be important for the fact that US President Barack Obama and his administration are, for the first time, going to engage in the process. The Major Economies Forum – an informal gathering of the governments of the main emitting countries, known amongst NGOs as the 'Major Emitters Forum' – has been meeting every month since March 2009. A number of preparatory meetings have taken place, and in Copenhagen itself we will no doubt be treated to the best that the theatre of international diplomacy can offer: the negotiations will be extended in a dramatic lock-in of the delegates, and at the very end, we will be served a 'result' of sorts, because in spite of recent official attempts to downplay the relevance of the summit, 'total failure' would just be too embarrassing an option to contemplate. And yet, it is unlikely that there will be a significant 'deal' of any kind, that the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol will be signed there. More likely, we will get a type of roadmap for further negotiations (with a protocol being finalised in Mexico in 2010). Still, there will be a dramatic showdown.

Alas, with all the attention, all the drama, not much has changed in the last 20 years, at least not for the better. Oil and gas consumption have increased enormously, and so has the rate of increase – and, of course, global greenhouse gas emissions show the same trend. Production and consumption patterns are still the same and, moreover, have rapidly been globalised through transnational capital, state policies and the lifestyle of a 'global middle class'.

The main reason for this lack of change is this: Environmental policies in general and climate change policies in particular are formulated in line with dominant political and economic structures and interests. Today, in spite of the economic and political crises that are rocking the globe, these dominant politics remain neoliberal and neo-imperial, oriented towards

competitiveness and maintaining and enhancing the power of Northern governments, corporations and elites. To be sure, this is not just a North-South issue: the lifestyles of Southern elites are as 'unsustainable', if the somewhat tainted word be allowed, as those dominant in the global North. Policies formulated at the global level reinforce the position of owners of assets, and of the global middle classes – *including* the middle classes of economically 'emerging' countries such as China, India or Brazil. The 'Western lifestyle' is still being promoted around the world, its destructive insanity notwithstanding. Human wellbeing and social security are still seen as closely tied to economic growth, which implies resource-intensive growth of car production, of airports, of industrialised farming, etc.

The role of global crisis discourses and the UNFCCC

In spite of its obviously political nature, the issue of climate change is often perceived as a question of *science* rather than *politics*. This in turn leads to a situation in which the problem of climate change is exclusively or predominantly framed as a problem that has to be dealt with *globally*, that is, from above, with Western knowledge and through the techniques of scientific and economic management rather than through social and political transformation. Such an approach obscures the many local conflicts over scarce resources and land use that are as constitutive of 'climate change' as any abstract figure expressing the amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere. The many local, practical alternatives – more precisely, existing low-carbon lifestyles – to be found are downplayed. Moreover, a number of ecologically sustainable forms of producing and living have actually been put under pressure not only by globalised capitalism, but more specifically by a top-down kind of climate politics. The build-up of pressure within the agricultural sector to produce crops for agrofuels for the world market is merely the most visible example of this trend. Over the last 20 years, a type of global resource management has emerged wherein government officials, business, scientists, some NGOs as well as media act in concert to control and manage the destruction of the environment and to profit from it both politically and economically. Over the same period, the *content* of these policies has been criticised. However, there has not been a critique of their *form*; this intergovernmental politics, this kind of diplomacy that occurs under the pressure of lobby groups searching for consensus, while systematically leading to weak compromises.

Most importantly, however, the question of form is one of the economic 'overcoding' of apparently environmental concerns surrounding climate change: the line of thought goes from scientific knowledge to global problem, and from global problem to economic opportunity, while questions of power (between genders, classes, North and South, of corporations…), lifestyle, production and consumption are pushed aside. Following the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s, the instruments of global environmental politics are largely market-based because powerful actors consider the market to be the superior means of dealing with fundamental problems such as climate change. Not by chance, the main instrument of the UNFCCC is therefore emissions trading. This in turn justifies weak policies 'at home'. The current division of labour (along lines of class, gender, race, age and power in the international system) is hardly problematised. Environmental policies have thus be-

come a moral and efficiency-based strategy aimed at the middle classes. The generalisation of the Western lifestyle (a generalisation that remains valid for most people in spite of the significant differences in power and wealth within Western societies) is cynical because billions of people are poor and lack access to even basic means of subsistence.
Besides this managerial framing, a *catastrophic discourse* about climate change and its effects has been established. In 2007, the head of the IPCC, Rajendra Pachauri, stated that 'we' must bring about a complete turnaround by 2012 in order to avoid 'disaster' and that the two or three years from 2007 onward would be decisive. This kind of invocation of urgency, its basis in scientific discourses notwithstanding, narrows the room for a critique of existing global climate change policies and politics; goes hand in hand with a 'technocratisation', that is, depoliticisation, of climate change politics; and places our hopes in the discovery of some as yet unknown silver bullet-technological solution that would simply 'fix' the anthropogenic greenhouse effect. Such technologies – if any – are likely to be large-scale and delivered by powerful players such as the DeserTec Consortium that is planning to build large-scale, centralised solar-power generating systems in the Sahara to supply Europe's energy needs.

Geographer Erik Swyngedouw has elsewhere shown how this catastrophic framing of climate change fits in neatly with powerful political discourses on post-democracy and post-politics. It seems that there is virtually no alternative to existing forms of politics and to the socioeconomic conditions that give rise to them. Quoting Fredric Jameson, he reminds us that today 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'.

To counter the development of a top-down system of global resource management, we need a broad public debate about as well as practical steps towards the necessary transformation of production and consumption patterns, society's relationship with nature and the power of states and capital. Of course, the UNFCCC is not responsible for the continued growth of CO_2 emissions or for our *fossilistic* mode of development, that is, for further climate change. This is a much broader process involving many more powerful economic and political actors and structures, for example, the lifestyles of the global upper and middle classes. At the institutional level, the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, all of which promote trade liberalisation and structural adjustment policies, are far more significant in terms of climate change (their policies accelerate it, for example, through expansion of industrialised agriculture and global transport, two major greenhouse gas emitters). The UNFCCC, however, maintains that it is *the* most central and appropriate institution to stop climate change. But in the last 15 years, it has become evident that technocratic approaches and their catastrophic framing change very little with respect to the problem: on the contrary, current lifestyles and dominant (and so far ecologically pointless) policy orientations are being re-legitimised.

To be sure, the UNFCCC embodies the fact that there is today a politicised awareness of climate change. Within the institution, however, this awareness is then framed in specific ways and in line with dominant interests and social forces. This spells daily disaster for billions of people – in fact, some movements from the global South argue that the policies driven or encouraged by

the UNFCCC are today a greater threat to their livelihoods than climate change itself. The political mode of crisis management that exists on this terrain is diplomacy, and behind this is the pursuit of 'national interests' under conditions of globalised capitalism and the race for competitiveness. Once governments come back from major conferences at which, yet again, the notion of 'being at a crossroads' has been evoked (as they are now doing around the climate summit in Copenhagen), they continue to obey powerful actors such as the car industry, seed companies, industrial farming, meat producers, etc. Additionally, environmental ministries tend to be relatively weak within governments, as energy issues are usually dealt with by other, stronger apparatuses.

Take agro-fuels as an example. When it comes to energy security and profits, critical questions and disastrous experiences are simply brushed aside. The issue of agro-fuels is presented by Southern governments such as Brazil or Indonesia as an 'opportunity for growth and development'. But for whom, and at what price? In these countries, agricultural restructuring is determined by the huge demand from the EU, where specific norms have recently been implemented that call for a higher percentage of ethanol to be mixed with gasoline. The global middle class consumers support these policy developments because they fear high energy prices. Alternatives are left aside or are reduced to a sideshow in the wider 'energy mix'. Finally, what we see in the field of environmental politics is an attempt to restabilise the neo-liberal, neo-imperial globalisation project by presenting a progressive image in the field of environmental policy-making. 'World leaders have understood the problem', is the message we hear from summits of the G-8 or the UNFCCC. But in fact, the current forms of environmental and resource politics are the result of, and in turn reproduce, existing relationships of domination. Irresponsible policies like the development of nuclear power plants are formulated in other forums such as the G-8 and will no doubt be picked up by the UNFCCC.

Beyond global resource management

Of course, a simple breakdown of the UNFCCC would probably not be the best possible outcome for the movements for global (climate and environmental) justice. We almost certainly need internationally formulated, binding and enforceable rules in order to promote the profound transformations necessary to deal with not only the climate crisis, but also the wider biocrisis, and to transform the idea of 'development'. From an emancipatory perspective, stopping climate change is of the utmost importance, which means stopping fossil-fuel-based patterns of production and consumption.

But radical social movements and critical NGOs as well as critical intellectuals and some media are increasingly recognising that the UNFCCC in its current form is not an adequate mechanism to deal with this enormous task. Like other international institutions, the UNFCCC is part of a capitalist, Western, white and masculine regime of global resource management. It should no longer be legitimised through the participation of NGOs, social movements and other critical actors. We do not need 'sustainable globalisation', basically another expression for neo-liberalism and neo-imperialism – or, put another way, maybe neo-liberalism's Plan B.

Fifteen years after the UNFCCC's first meeting in 1994, we can clearly see that what is needed are fundamentally different political and social responses. In this process, states will still be important, but they and their officials will not be the forces driving it. On the contrary, today they are mainly an obstacle to serious action against climate change. Changing production and consumption patterns, lifestyles or the meaning of the 'good life', and attacking corporate power and the politics of resource management are complex and long-term processes. Several elements need to be considered. One major element has to be a practically rooted critique of the dogma of competitiveness linked to technological developments. There are few governments and social actors who have really understood the dangers of existing trends. What is needed is a repoliticisation of the 'market'. It is not just the efficient mechanism for allocating resources that it is often taken to be, but a highly effective instrument for the production of domination of some people over others – and for hiding precisely this relationship. Markets imply and in turn obscure power and exploitation along the lines of class, gender, race and North-South divisions. And at the same time as we need to criticise the structure of market relations, it is equally crucial to restrict the power of industrial and financial corporations that thrive within them.

Of course, if such an endeavour were successful, it would mean less economic growth, with all that this implies for profits, the power of private capital, the tax basis of the state and employment in the traditional sectors. An emancipatory politics has to take care not to be moralistic about environmental issues. Of course we need to consume less meat, cars/auto-mobility and electrical gadgets. But this cannot amount to a simple moral claim that ignores social structures and the power relations on which they are based. Alternative and attractive forms of living, producing and exchanging; new social divisions of labour; and alternative identities are necessary, as well as possible, and in many cases revolve around concrete struggles for the protection of the natural commons (water, biodiversity, air, etc.) against their commodification. The public sector and its accompanying infrastructures, more energy efficiency and sustainable goods are not only linked to learning processes, but might also call into question the power of certain producers and the speed of globalisation. What we need is the ecological conversion of existing industries, while taking advantage of the enormous knowledge of the producers that lies within them. Environmental issues are profoundly linked to questions of social power. For example, over-exploitation of labour, especially of illegalised migrants and many workers in the global South, obeys the same logic of profit and accumulation that is at work in the destruction of nature. It is necessary to politicise the immediate desires of workers for cheap food, energy and other goods, which are produced under unsustainable and unsocial conditions. But there is also a problem here that needs to be solved: the short-term interests of many people are linked to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Emancipatory socio-ecological orientations and practices therefore need to be linked to all aspects of life, as well as to a redistribution of social wealth.

Emancipatory demands and conflicts

Many alternatives are thinkable, possible and already exist. It is possible that socio-ecological conflicts can show that much more is at stake than symbolically tackling climate change through global resource management: questions of democracy and decision-making, power over social knowledge and the means of production, the necessary reduction of working-hours, the valorising of reproductive activities concerning caring, health, food, etc. For that, we need to develop radical demands and proposals through debates and the exchange of views and experiences. With our critique of dominant climate change and environmental policies we are not cynical about climate change and we do not intend to strengthen the lobby that defends the fossil-fuel path of development. However, we do not see the solution to the problem in Western scientific knowledge, in intergovernmental processes and in ecological modernisation for the Western middle classes at the expense of many others, especially the poor, and the material living conditions on earth. Politics in times of deep socio-ecological crises have to change; to become a democratic and informed transformative process, taking into consideration the many ambiguities that exist, but with a view to a more just world based on solidarity beyond the dogma of competitiveness and profitability. We want to reorientate debates and policies towards fundamental socio-ecological and emancipatory transformations in conjunction with an acknowledgement of alternative practices and processes.

About this publication

We met in January 2009 in Belem at the World Social Forum for the first time to discuss compiling a dossier as a contribution to ongoing debates about the politics of climate change. It is this inspiring environment that motivated us, an environment where the practical critique of globalised capitalism in its many facets is condensed, where the frustrating and productive experiences of struggles against exploitation and patriarchy and for justice and real democracy come together. For a long time, climate change issues had not been at the top of the agenda of the global justice movement, but a few years ago, this changed. And still it is not at all clear what a radical or emancipatory climate politics will look like.

Our goal is to contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the emerging climate justice movement and to create resonances between different perspectives and spheres of engagement. We want to render more explicit a multiplicity of experiences and proposals and put them into context, referring to real or supposed tensions and contradictions – such as that between 'development' and 'climate justice' – and showing the existing wide array of alternatives. The activities around the COP 15 in Copenhagen are a starting point in the creation of such a broad movement – or in Naomi Klein's inspired words used to describe the anti-WTO protests in Seattle exactly 10 years before the publication of this dossier, they can be the movement's 'coming-out party'. A 'movement' goes beyond the activities of activists, their importance notwithstanding. It includes convincing many people to engage in different everyday practices and convincing

journalists to refer to voices from outside the conference halls and official science. It implies politicians who are willing to break with the dogma of competitiveness and politics as a power game among elites and it takes seriously changes in institutions such as private and public firms, schools and universities. This 'movement' is a broad process of social transformation and its core and catalyst is the collective thinking and action that is currently taking place within the climate justice movement.

This issue of *Critical Currents* was a collective undertaking. First of all, we would like to thank the authors contributing to the dossier. We are grateful for the many contributions we received from activists and scholars from different continents and social contexts, with knowledge of varying fields of international climate and energy politics, and with very diverse perspectives. The common ground is that we are all preoccupied with, and critical of, the direction in which international climate politics are and have been heading for a long time.

Three of the editors want to warmly thank the fourth, Tadzio Mueller, who had by far the heaviest workload and who is in many ways responsible for getting this issue done. We are grateful for the generous financial support for his and other work that came from Focus on the Global South, Sabine Nuss at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, as well as the Institute of Political Science at Vienna University. Special thanks go to the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and its director, Henning Melber, for giving us the prestigious intellectual and political space of *Critical Currents* and for sharing our political concerns over dominant developments and our desires to change the world. Our thanks also go to the good people associated with the Foundation who did such a wonderful job on language editing, layout and other essential tasks: Peter Colenbrander, Mattias Lasson and Karim Kerrou. As usual, all remaining flaws are entirely our responsibility.

We hope that this publication can contribute to shaping a future climate and energy politics that will prove capable of solving the multiple crises that climate change is part of, and which humanity is facing in the second decade of the 21st century.