Forget about Copenhagen!
The catastrophe is occurring already

This position paper, written by the BUKO[1] Working Group on Social Ecology, is a contribution to the debates on climate change, with a view, in particular, to the UN climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. It also seeks to contribute to a critical analysis of the hegemonic climate discourse and to the discussions about what positions an emancipatory, anti-hegemonic movement should adopt. In the following text, we make the point that nothing is to be expected from the climate negotiations in Copenhagen. They are part of official approaches to climate politics according to which those market forces that have caused the socio-ecological crisis in the first place are to lead us out of that crisis again. We maintain in contrast, that what matters is not the outcome of Copenhagen, but linking the debates on "environmental" problems to approaches that are critical of capitalism and different forms of dominance and authority. Moreover, it is essential, in our eyes, to develop approaches alternative to hegemonic climate politics. We seek, in other words, to take the ecological crisis, which is becoming worse and worse, seriously while not losing our heads - and we will continue to be critical of the system.

As this paper has been written from a German perspective, most examples are taken from a German context as well.

In the mainstream media and government discourse, climate change has become something of a perennial hot topic. There is a broad consensus, now, that the climate must be "saved". In 2006, German chancellor Angela Merkel declared combating climate change to be "the most important challenge that humanity is facing" (Lucke 2009, 6). In the climate field, it is government policy today not to question hegemonic interests and existing policies. Criticism and discontent are dealt with within the framework of hegemonic politics. We fundamentally disagree with this approach.

This paper is a contribution to ongoing leftist debates and the process of agreeing on common positions among the left. We focus on climate change and related policies as examples that serve to illustrate more general patterns of the relations between society and nature.[2] These patterns may be discerned from hegemonic constructions of nature and the dominant approaches towards nature, and they are generated by the dynamics of capitalism.

BUKO had already formulated a similar criticism in the 1990s with regard to the then lively discussion on sustainability.[3] Now, as then, our focus should not be on contributing to making mainstream climate politics more robust through some critical observations nor on contributing

toward developing more effective instruments for climate protection or environmental protection more generally. Instead, we share the following premise of the Antirassismusbüro Büro Bremen (ARAB):[4] "Our objective is not to jump onto the elites' running train and to restrict ourselves to painting pictures of an imminent apocalypse (and subsequently use fear as a basis for policy-making), but to describe and denounce climate change as yet another of the destructive forms in which the logic inherent to the capitalist system become manifest - a manifestation which is not to be under-estimated." (ARAB 2008, 7).

We want to exchange views with others and develop emancipatory perspectives even though we are told that there is no time. On the contrary, we see such calls for haste as a method which has repeatedly been used for upholding and legitimising political rule. However, genuine and fundamental changes require a joint and broad debate and need to question multiple circumstances of power and domination. Current socio-ecological developments and future social and political approaches for dealing with nature are much too important to let mainstream politics, corporate PR-departments and media handle them.

There is, on the one hand, a difference between our position and a certain alarmism that many leftist contributions display which, while having a rather critical view of current developments, tend produce abstract calls for "quick action". On the other hand, we are critical of strategies of green modernisation that are supported widely by leftist movements, NGOs, parties and trade unions. Such strategies are aimed at using existing institutions, a Western/scientific type of knowledge and efficient technologies for bringing about fundamental changes. What such strategies fail to do is link "environmental problems" to questions of power and criticising capitalism - which we consider essential. We seek, in other words, to take the ecological crisis, which is becoming worse and worse, seriously while not losing our heads - and we will continue to be critical of the system.

In the following section, we start by approaching the current state of general excitement about climate politics and what is behind it.

1) BUKO is an independent umbrella organization of about 120 grass-root third-world groups, development organizations, internationalist initiatives, solidarity groups, fair trade shops, campaigns and alternative media projects in Germany. BUKO has its roots in the solidarity movements with struggles for liberation which were and are taking place in the Global South. BUKO is a forum for leftist debates and, as an organization, takes a critical position towards all forms of domination. The authors of this paper may be contacted at mail @buko.info.

2) We do use the term "nature", but are well aware of the fact that it is a problematic term. When talking about "nature" we do not mean any "natural", permanent entity that exists independent from and outside of society, but something that is transformed into a specific notion of itself by society.

3) It should be noted, however, that the similarities between the climate and sustainability field are mainly discursive in character. In terms of material effects, climate change entails a physical threat for human beings and the ways they live (e.g. through rising sea levels) that is much more evident than the results of a lack of sustainability which remained rather vague in the debate of the 1990s.

4) ARAB is short for "Bureau for Anti-Racism Bremen". ARAB is a grass-root anti-racist group, based in the Northern-German city Bremen.

Subsequently, we analyse how international climate politics and the dominant climate discourse attempt to regulate the crisis, and put alternative, emancipatory viewpoints and practices up for discussion. Instead of describing climate change as a "global environmental problem" that may be regulated with the help of Western technologies and science in the framework of a process of green modernisation or a "green new deal", we propose to conceive of climate change as the expression of a current crisis of social relations with nature. From such a perspective, global imbalances and power relations become visible. Instead of pushing for more efficient and rigorous global political management, we demand a fundamental change to those hegemonic patterns of production and consumption that have caused the present crisis in the first place.

The real reasons why everyone is so excited about climate change

The discussion about man-made climate change is not quite as new as it sometimes appears to be today. Scientists have agreed, more or less, since the late 1970s that the emission of greenhouse gases will, in the foreseeable future, produce significant climate effects. The 1980s saw a politicisation of the climate problem: International conferences (e.g. in Villach 1985 and in Toronto 1988) were held, and concluded with radical good-will declarations. In 1987, climate change was the main topic on the agenda of the G8 summit in Paris (see Missbach 1999 on this period). During the 1990s, climate change attracted another few waves of media and political attention, in particular on the occasion of the Rio Summit on the Environment and Development (1992), in Berlin in the framework of the UNFCCC, and in Kyoto, when the Protocol of the same name was adopted. While in subsequent years, public attention seemed to shift away from climate change, the issue has, more recently been, the focus of attention of the media and government politics, as well as of business and NGOs, constantly since 2006. Climate change has, since the G8 Heiligendamm summit in 2007, been on the agenda of various EU and world economic summits and has also been a topic used in electoral campaigning in Germany.

There are various reasons why climate change is so high on everyone's agenda nowadays.

The progress in scientific knowledge about climate change is the first of these reasons: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its fourth assessment report of 2007, made it even clearer than before that the 20th century has seen a global warming of about three quarters of a degree, and that this warming has been caused, in most part, by human activity. In addition, the Stern report (2006) pointed out that taking far-reaching measures to combat climate change is economically more advantageous than doing nothing and waiting for incalculable damage to occur. Thus, combating climate change has recently also been boosted from a mainstream economic perspective: "The earlier Europe moves, the greater the opportunity to use its skills and technology to boost innovation and growth through exploiting first mover advantage." is what the EU Commission writes in a paper published in early 2008. New markets - for more efficient and renewable energy technologies for mitigating climate change as well as for adapting to it - are emerging and provide industrialised countries with additional export opportunities.

When the global financial and economic crisis started to dominate the political discourse, the initial main concern was how to minimize the recession and to return to positive growth rates. But even for this purpose, climate change is being used. According to mainstream-wisdom, the crisis is to be used as a starting point for ecological re-arrangements that strengthen competitiveness. In some places, such as Germany or California climate politics, including government subsidies and accompanying emission reduction targets, is openly labeled as an economic recovery scheme that would function even if there was no climate change.

Moreover, the climate problem can easily be instrumentalised for ideological and political purposes. Since global missions such as the fight against drugs or terror have failed or are, at least, discredited, the climate, as a "common good" which must be "protected", offers some potential for establishing a new "global mission". And that label, in turn, may be used to justify the effective use of imperial measures and even military interventions.

Recent developments in the Global South and the way they are perceived by industrialised countries are one further aspect why the climate topic has become so important: Non-industrialised countries are, today, already responsible for about 55% of global annual emissions - and the percentage is growing. In response, industrialised countries are asking emerging countries to contribute to reducing emissions on a global scale. Such demands are indicative of the re-emerging strength of neo-colonial global patterns. However, it is not only becoming more and more evident that there is a real danger for the world's climate; it is also more and more evident that the Global South will be hit much harder by climate change than the North - due to the different effects that climate change has in different countries as well as greater vulnerability and weaker capacities for adaptation in the Global South.

Last but not least, the media began to relate extreme weather events in Northern countries, such as the Elbe floods in 2002 or hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, to climate change, which has lead to a growing awareness in the richer countries that the consequences of climate change will not remain something abstract, to become relevant only in the future or to affect only the Global South.

How the crisis is being regulated: the climate discourse and climate policy

It is our aim to discuss the multiple substantial and social dimensions of climate change. However, at this point, we would like to deal with the "official climate discourse", because discourses create plausibility and legitimacy and guide the course of action, in climate politics and in other areas.

The current official climate discourse is dominated by governments of the industrialized North, climate research institutes and trade associations. Climate change is constructed as a global environmental and humanity problem, which can only be addressed through the collective efforts of the community of states, in close cooperation with science, private business and (international) civil society. Hence, international treaties and agreements have been adopted - particularly the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol 1997 and its successor agreement, which is to be adopted in December 2009 in Copenhagen and shall come into effect in 2011.

Climate change is, without doubt, a problem which is global in reach. However, the symbolic discourse of a presumed equal level of threat for everyone and the aim of controlling that threat through market instruments deserve criticism for at least three reasons:

Firstly, putting the emphasis on the "common" obscures who is responsible for climate change - mainly the industrialized countries.

Thus, so called emerging countries with strong economic growth are requested to reduce their emissions. In this context, neither historic responsibilities nor the still higher per capita emissions of industrialised countries are taken into account.

Secondly, the fact that climate change will produce socio-ecological effects which are very different in different times and places as well as for different parts of the world population is neglected in the discourse. Human beings are not affected in an equal measure by climate change. Quite to the contrary, risks - such as altered patterns of rainfall, the rise of sea levels, the drying up of continental waters or the flooding of coastal regions and especially the vulnerability[5] of humans - are distributed very unequally.

For small peasants in India, for example, the effects of climate change, interacting with existing problems like the politics of liberalisation in the agricultural sector, the profoundly unjust world trading-system, the introduction of patents on seeds and tendencies of privatisation in the public service sector amount to an existential crisis. Meanwhile, the German middle-class gets upset over increasing electricity costs or over the prospect that their ski vacations may have to be cancelled due to the rising snow line. However, even in Germany, climate change and political response strategies produce effects which are different for different people and social groups.

People with low incomes see themselves increasingly confronted with the new phenomenon of "energy poverty", for instance if electricity gets disconnected as a result of unpaid open bills and the costs for heating and energy turn into a "second" rent. Altogether, new inequalities and distributive conflicts are emerging and existing ones are being intensified.

Thirdly, the UN-moderated, multilateral climate policy (and other environmental policies) suggest that experts, heads of state and the governments of all states jointly, supported by innovative corporations and constructive environmental NGOs, can and want to solve the problem. Until now, societies have tended to place a lot of confidence in these policies. It seems that those in power are succeeding, in cooperation with the private sector and civil society, in creating their own legitimacy through global, mostly merely symbolic environmental policies. Regardless of disputes concerning details, the objective is clearly defined: 2°C rise in global average temperature seems acceptable to the political establishment. The G8, during their summit in L'Aquila in July 2009 agreed on this aim. Various NGOs such as Greenpeace, Germanwatch or the WWF also support it and have adopted the role of driving policy-makers to take adequate steps. The commitment to the 2°C limit creates, however, the impression that nature is predictable and can be controlled by technocratic means, even though scientific studies admit that due to uncertainties inherent to the forecasts, the range of potential changes is quite large. The existing global-technocratic environmental management hence disguises the fact that every setting of a limit entails a normative and especially a political decision, which reflects the dominant power structure. 2°C average global warming may not be too big a problem for countries situated in the temperate zones - but for many states of the South the predicted scenarios are anything but "acceptable". A closer look shows that the broad climate consensus hides important conflicts of interest and prevailing inconsistencies. What is hardly ever discussed - even by many NGOs - is how climate change and resource use are systematically linked to the capitalist model of production and lifestyle, prevailing especially in the metropolises, but also among elites in the Global South. This becomes clearer when looking more closely at the contradictions and blind spots, which are inherent to the system and manifest themselves in the crisis that climate change represents, and the patterns of political reactions to climate change. The capitalist need for accumulation together with a belief in progress is what is causing climate change in the first place. Climate policy responds by largely acknowledging the existing social-ecological problems, but then addresses them by using mechanisms that are compatible with market logics. The instruments of choice are (at least since the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol) market and technology based mechanisms for the reduction of CO2 emissions, such as emissions trading, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), the so called efficiency revolution as well as novel methods for technological control over nature, e.g. the Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technology for the sequestration and subsequent underground storage of CO2, which is currently being tested.

In brief: those market forces that have caused the socio-ecological crisis are also expected to solve it, within the boundaries of the current system. Hence, it is becoming quite clear that there is a convergence between partly symbolical political approaches on the one hand and strategies of growth for the global capitalist economy on the other. While energy multinationals fight every serious attempt at climate protection in defence of their base of accumulation, they nevertheless try to integrate climate protection into their corporate strategies, even though frequently only at a symbolic level. Thus, ecological modernisation is becoming the magic word for "our collective future".

Meanwhile and in the midst of the crisis, the UN environmental program (UNEP) and the Green party in Germany propagate a so called Green New Deal. The idea behind this concept is to start off a new cycle of accumulation through government support and, partially, regulation. This is to lead to a form of "eco-capitalism". Controlled allocation of natural resources or the global commons are to lead to internalising "environmental cost", i.e. whoever causes such costs will have to cover them. The ultimate aim is reconciling economic and environmental goals. Yet such an approach rather amounts to a further expansion of the capitalist world system, by subjecting even more human activities to the rationale of exploitation. This will hardly lead to halting the private appropriation and the destruction of the environment - they will, more so than today, only be permitted to those who can "afford" them financially.

Current climate politics establish and maintain eco-colonial structures. The CDM is one manifestation of this; it was created with the goal of promoting "sustainable", "clean" development in the countries of the Global South. The CDM, which is part of the top-down official way of addressing problems, provides for the relocation of unwanted emission reduction measures from the Global North to the Global South. Energy supplying companies do no not have to reduce their carbon emissions in their backyards, but rather in countries where the cost is low. At the same time, they give themselves a "green" and "social" image. Moreover, there are indications that the aim of reducing global "fuel poverty" through the development of de-centralised renewable energy supply systems is completely ignored in the CDM. Investment in the renewables sector primarily goes into large-scale, hierarchical projects; such projects often produce new local and regional social-ecological conflicts which later do not appear on any carbon balance

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5) Vulnerability is, generally, a result of the fact that human existence is subject to various risks; the term also refers to the ability of human beings or social groups to cope with risks or critical situations.

sheet. Some examples are monoculture reforestation projects, support for genetically modified crops, or the solar power plant project Desertec.

The hegemonic approach to regulating the crisis is, however, not limited to the use of market instruments. It becomes more and more evident that the alarmism that is part of the mainstream climate discourse will also be used to justify repressive state policies in the name of "eco-security".[6] In other fields of environmental politics such policies have been a reality for some time already, for instance in cases where the local population in countries of the Global South was expelled to create nature reserves or space for "climate friendly" projects such as large-scale forest areas, areas for agrofuel cultivation or dams for the generation of power.

Alternative perspectives and practices

In our understanding, climate change has to be seen in the context of a crisis in society's interrelation with nature. A substantial part of this crisis is social and economic questions of participation in and access to goods and services, gender relations, agro-industrial food production, mobility and consumption, capitalist strategies of accumulation and hierarchical processes of decision-making as well as the possibilities of resistance against these. A simple repair-job concerning the hegemonically secured instruments of climate politics will not get us anywhere, as long as their blind spots are not exposed and widely discussed. Especially with the current global financial and economic crisis, there could be more readiness among people to question "the system" in general. On the other hand it is especially in this situation that voices against the dominant discourse of "stabilising the system at any cost" are important in order to make clear that without fundamental reorientation neither the economic nor the ecological crisis can be dealt with.

What are the alternatives? In the long term, what we need is a progressive socio-ecological movement that would be equipped to demand climate justice and global social rights and to contribute to putting them into practice. So this is not about romanticising nature for nature's sake, nor about a clean conscience-program for the middle and upper classes (see ARAB 2008) in capitalist centres. Such a movement would instead demand a radical reorientation towards the use-value and solidarity amongst people. This would, in a longer perspective, mean to go beyond the hierarchical way in which society relates to nature currently.

A progressive position - also concerning socio-ecological struggles for change - begins with reflecting and criticising the dominant way of presenting and defining any "problem". The choice of words and concepts is essential - they are not neutral. Concepts shape actions, they define the field of possible solutions and let certain aspects of a problem become visible or make them remain obscure. Sometimes social discourses can also shape concepts by means of which attention is diverted from other problems. In this sense, concepts organize our perception of the world and produce knowledge.

The socio-ecological crisis - especially climate change - is being defined in mainstream discourse as an "environmental problem", with "sustainable development" being presented as the way out of the crisis. Climate change is presented as "manageable" within the present system and solutions are already at our disposal. As we have seen, a combination of market-mediated and, increasingly, also repressive instruments and technical innovations are presented as the best way to address the problem, if these measures progress beyond the level of purely symbolic politics at all. Speaking instead of a crisis in society's way of interrelating with nature, means showing how the exploitative forms of appropriating nature are linked with social relations of dominance and power. The dominant ways of production and consumption, for instance, are shaped by social power-relations. This is the case, for example, with ease of mobility or the introduction of new technologies such as genetically modified seeds. Technology is not neutral, but instead always linked to specific interests and it has to be evaluated with this in mind.

What does this interrelation of the social and the ecological mean? On the one hand, we have seen that social issues express themselves in ecological conflicts, that social power-relations are to a large part produced and reproduced by who controls access to natural resources or who gets to shape "environmental conditions", and that anti-hierarchical struggles over the control of resources are a decisive part of the struggle for liberation. On the other hand, relations of domination inscribe themselves into how we relate to nature. The socio-ecological crisis is not an unfortunate accident in the capitalist mode of production that might be remedied by modernizing that mode of production in ecological terms. The crisis is based on the fundamental principles of capitalism (accumulation as the dominant purpose instead of the satisfaction of needs), as well as the interrelation of these principles with patriarchal and racist power-structures. The problem is not per se that nature is being utilised: people have to utilise nature and transform it according to their needs in order to stay alive. It is the dominant ways in which nature is used that are directed at maximizing profits and dominating nature, the hierarchical division of labor along lines of class, gender, ethnicity and the exploitation that comes with it. As far as the dominant kind of climate politics tries, under pressure from social movements, to take into account other interests, it will always run against the imperatives of capital-accumulation and scientific and technological domination of nature.

A progressive approach to the socio-ecological crisis would mean to expose social power-structures, criticise them and overcome them. That is the difference between an anti-hierarchical concept of society's interrelation with nature and the ever more common concept of "sustainability" in politics, civil society and management. A criticism of power-structures, when put into practice, is not only directed at state and business policies and a public that is to a large part conformist, but it also questions a constitution of subjectivity destructive towards nature and piling up material goods and possessions for its own sake. Power is not just something inflicted upon people from the outside, but also something that they internalise and reproduce.

Fundamental change happens sometimes in huge leaps, but mostly it needs time and periods of learning and searching, in which alternatives to the proposed hierarchical solutions are developed and experiences with existing practical alternatives can be shared. Whether and how fundamental alternatives result in state-policies or changed modes of production and consumption, depends on social struggles as part of a process of emancipation. Such processes are more difficult against the background of the current climate-hype and the time-pressure and demand for quick solutions connected with it. "We" have to "save the world", we are being told, and we have to hurry. This is exactly what favors hierarchical ways of dealing with the

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6) The term eco-security denotes security threats caused by "environmental" conflicts, such as conflicts over resources or land or conflicts related to migration caused by environmental change (see Brunnengräber/Dietz/Wolff 2008).

socio-ecological crisis, whereas alternatives that are created and put into practice every day in social struggles around the world are considered irrelevant or made invisible. In particular, states and the business sector - supported by the media and under pressure from the so-called civil society - claim that they are competent. Governments propose changing the rules in order for capitalist and imperial business to continue as usual. Businesses embrace the concept of sustainability to continue and legitimise their activities. From a radical socio-ecological and internationalist perspective, however, it becomes evident that the dominant forms and concepts of (sustainable) politics and production are themselves part of the problem.

It is therefore important to demand and fight for social rights, political rights and economic participation - and not just abstractly. The experiences, criticism and theoretical insights from social movements in struggles over the utilisation of nature have to be recognized as an essential part of the necessary search process. Often they point towards the possibility of a less hierarchical relation to nature, that has been either ignored by the political and scientific mainstream or been dismissed as a local niche-strategy - saying that we have to deal with the whole (the planet, the future of mankind, etc.) It is therefore part of an internationalist strategy to create a space wherein the positions of social movements from the global south can be heard, and to allow for the sharing of knowledge and experiences concerning pre-existing strategies of resistance and coping with problems.

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