

# Still not loving COPs

**It is that time again – a climate summit is lined up once more, this time in Paris December 2015. NGOs and social movements are busy planning activities at decentralised locations as well as in Paris. Meanwhile delegates are eagerly negotiating on a follow up agreement for the expired Kyoto Protocol and its commitments for emission reductions. But hang on, haven't we been here before?**

Yes, we have. For example in Copenhagen 2009. Already at that time, we ourselves - the working group Societal Relationships with Nature of the BUKO (Confederation of Internationalism), wrote a similar paper<sup>1</sup>. It seems that certain aspects have fallen into disregard once again. For this reason we would like to outline in this paper: why climate change is primarily not an ecological problem, but closely intertwined with social structures; why it is worth social movements repeatedly insisting on this fact rather than drawing up a catastrophic climate scenario; and why we do not expect much from the climate summit in Paris from a socio-ecological and internationalist perspective but instead view climate politics an instrument to maintain existing inequalities rather than a promising pathway. The paper's aim is to intervene in the climate debate and to raise flags when we actually reproduce paradigms and lines of arguments that are in opposition to an emancipatory and socio-ecological transformation.

We use the term "societal relationships with nature" to demonstrate that „nature“<sup>2</sup> can not be viewed in isolation, taking no social, political and economic conditions into account. Our view of "nature" is conditioned by social factors in the same way as the use of "nature" is dependent on economic factors. "Nature" has always been socially moulded. Changes in the appropriation of and access to "nature" can not occur without changes in ownership and rights of access, changes in modes of production and consumption, changes in class and gender relations – as well as the other way around.

<sup>1</sup> *Forget about Copenhagen. The catastrophe is already occurring. (2009), [http://www.buko.info/fileadmin/user\\_upload/gesnat/klima\\_engl.pdf](http://www.buko.info/fileadmin/user_upload/gesnat/klima_engl.pdf)*

<sup>2</sup> *Despite rejecting dichotomous differentiation of "nature" and society and the idea of nature as an entity external of social conditions, independent of social factors, material, non human structures have to be named. We decided to use „nature“ in quotations marks as to draw attention to the seeming naturalness of "nature" and to allow taking its social production into account*

## **It's not a climate crisis, but a social crisis!**

Problems do not occur in isolation nor in separation from their social and discursive contexts. Dealing with problems and the search for solutions are not only part of social disputes, rather the naming and framing of problems, the specific description and representations, as well as the chosen terminology and categories are already results of social negotiations that are embedded in discourses of power. Which analysis and which kind of knowledge will prevail and become hegemonic is therefore neither automatic nor trivial, but determined for the structuring of a certain problem, the resulting logic and approaches.

By naming the climate crisis as an environmental crisis and not as a crisis of societal relationships with nature, the climate crisis can be described as a problem of an external nature slightly out of balance and as if it were not part of social conditions. Naming climate change as the future, irruptive "largest threat to humanity" leaves no time for dealing and addressing those fundamental problems. Additionally there is another danger with this kind of problem framing, as it bears the danger of losing sight of other symptoms of social inequality and industrial appropriation of nature - especially prevalent in the Global South and ascribing them merely to climate change.

If describing climate change particularly as a scientifically measurable problem of overly high CO<sub>2</sub> concentration then merely high emission rates appear to be problematic. The fundamental problem of capitalist modes of production with the associated profit maximisation and exploitation of people and "nature" remain invisible. This conveys an image of science-based and describable casual relations that "merely" have to be brought into equilibrium. In this way, only symptoms are addressed instead of the causes, because this perspective ignores the tight intertwine between social and "material" crisis causation and phenomena. This legitimises short sighted solutions that focus on the reduction of human induced green house gas emissions. Simultaneously, pressing and necessary changes to overcome global inequalities are suppressed. Climate change can serve as an excuse to not question social practices and power relations.

Naming the climate crisis as a crisis of current societal relationships with nature allows us to name dominant forms of appropriation of "nature" and the logic of permanent added value within the capitalist system as a foundation to the destruction of nature. Thus the overfishing of the oceans, the cutting down of rainforest, the pollution of oceans, soil and air can no longer be

viewed as pitiful accidents in an otherwise welfare enhancing mode of production. But they have to be understood as a fundamental prerequisite for our way of life that mainly people in the Global North and upper class in the Global South profit from. This means that the focus should not only lie on greenhouse gas emissions and their effects within the context of nation states. Rather it has to be about questioning social conditions which produce certain forms of the appropriation of “nature” (large scale farming, monocultures, cash crop production etc.) and which in turn are the causes of the destruction of nature/climate change.

An analysis of the fundamental conditions for climate change makes it clear that insisting on the ideology of economic growth and the idea of the development of a “green” kind of capitalism will not change any of these fundamental problems. Within green capitalism the pressure for profit maximisation will necessarily lead to an expansion of the destructive appropriation of nature. Even using more efficient modes of production will not solve the fundamental contradictions of capitalist production. Green capitalism in the Global North can only function by moving dirty forms of the appropriation of nature to the Global South. This becomes apparent with the example of moving dirty industries to China thus allowing German and other western countries to do smart accounting of their emissions.

Climate change has to be understood as part of our social model and its associated problems. Naming climate change as such allows politicisation of the issue and that way ownership rights, power and gender relations can be linked to the climate crisis. This opens up opportunities for a fundamental transformation that moves beyond addressing only the symptoms. Current climate politics is though very far from naming capitalism as a root cause for climate change.

## Who believes in Father Christmas?

The international climate negotiations are based on more or less deliberately maintaining an illusion. With each new press release or round of talks, and with each new climate summit, discursive spaces are created that tell us that the problem of “climate change” is taken seriously and is addressed with all available expertise searching for adequate counter strategies. But such negotiations legitimise those approaches that turn the climate crisis into a problem that merely has to be managed – similar to the financial and real estate crisis – by so called experts in the correct manner. This suggests that the aim of effectively fighting climate change would be possible with the right kind of political leverage within the current economic model.

But even those who believe that the international climate negotiations are generally suitable in order to find ways out of the climate crisis cannot expect much from the negotiations. It

is a case of politically finding the lowest common denominator. Voluntary commitment and measures have become now the credo of national and international climate negotiations. What is obvious within trade negotiations – commonly negotiated, controllable and enforceable commitments – appears to be impossible regarding the climate. It is left to the negotiating parties to determine what their climate policy should look like and integrate it into their self-defined commitment (in the language of international climate negotiations so called Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, INDCs)<sup>3</sup>. The missing willingness of states to real, far-reaching measures became apparent within the Kyoto Protocol. For the Protocol, the baseline 1990 for measuring the commitments for emission reduction was chosen so it was easy for the EU and the Eastern European States to adhere to them after their industries collapsed.

The control center at which climate policy is made is heavily influenced by unequal power relations between the Global North and Global South<sup>4</sup>. Those regions dealing more strongly with the most obvious effects of climate change but who have also contributed the least, have little means to influence the political process.

In the hegemonic narration of the UN climate negotiations corporations and industries massively contributing to climate change are viewed as part of the solution and not as part of the problem. Rather those corporations have discovered climate change and the discourse about it as a lucrative business and in this context have discovered new options for capital accumulation.

Yet the climate negotiations are much more inclusive and participatory than the larger share of international political negotiations (TTIP, WTO, G7). The participation of NGOs in the climate summits is contradictory. On the one hand they can possibly avert the worst when participating. On the other hand they add to the hegemonic consensus and through their press work strengthen the public summit hype. When at the end disappointing non-decisions and non-committal declarations are sold as a success, it becomes clear that already civil society’s participation legitimises the climate negotiations. Alternatives are no longer negotiated as a critique but as additional options.

<sup>3</sup> As countries participating in the climate negotiations could not agree upon future emissions reductions, like the agreed percentages of the Kyoto Protocol, the INDCs were introduced. States can list different climate measures that they want to commit to in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Larger and richer countries generally have larger delegations at those summits compared to smaller countries. See Heike Schroeder, Maxwell T. Boykoff und Laura Spiers, *Equity and state representations in climate negotiations*, *Nature Climate Change*, 2012, [http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/admin/publication\\_files/2012.28.pdf](http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/admin/publication_files/2012.28.pdf)

Even empty declarations of intent, such as those recently announced at the G7, were not exposed as smoking grenades but praised as the important steps in the right direction. Thus the active participation in and following of the negotiations are first of all stabilising and legitimising of the dominant problem, framing and proposed coping strategies, instead of displaying civil society's failure in taking up their responsibility to reveal the negotiation's function of reinforcing existing power relations.

## The market will take care of it!

With the introduction of market mechanisms as the central instruments in dominant climate politics, emission rights have become linked to financial resources instead of absolute thresholds<sup>5</sup>. With the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) companies are allowed to finance projects in the Global South to reduce greenhouse gas emissions thereby offsetting their own emissions. Instead of avoiding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the polluting countries, reductions take place in countries in which reduction costs are low. Unfavourable reduction measures are transferred from North to South thereby reproducing and establishing neo-colonial structures. The logic of a capitalist market is also transferred to "nature" fostering a perspective in which "nature" is only worth protecting according to its monetary value. Until now emissions trading has mainly created new markets and investment opportunities. Emissions trading, a boom in solar energy and increasing energy efficiency may have left a mark in the global CO<sub>2</sub> curve, but contrary to economic recessions have not lead to a trend reversal in the rising of emissions. Greater changes in the CO<sub>2</sub> curve have historically been as a result of economic crises such as in 1990 or the recent global financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009.

Moreover, in this dominant and problematic framing, the climate crisis is reduced to a rise in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. Any kind of technology promising a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> seems welcome, no matter how half baked and daredevil they may be (i.e. Solar Radiation Management, Carbon Capture and Storage). But counting on future innovations prevents pressing and necessary social changes and solutions. Additionally, negative consequences of such new technologies are hardly raised – if at all<sup>6</sup>. At times the consequences are just not possible to assess. Structural

5 Who emits greenhouse gases beyond their nationally allocated emission permits can do so if they show a certificate allowing to do so. This can be bought on a market from those who emit less.

6 One example is Solar Radiation Management: it is a form of geo-engineering by which artificial particles are added to the atmosphere, so as to reflect the sun's rays thereby reducing the heat radiation. Computer models predict massive cuts in rainfalls for Sub Sahara Africa and parts of Asia, leading to massive cuts on productivity in agricultural production. For the Northern hemisphere effects would be minimal. See Naomi Klein, 2014, *This Changes Everything*, p. 270.

transformation and social disputes about different modes of production and ways of life become marginalised in a depoliticised management of ecological modernisation.

## Those who do not want to speak about capitalism shall remain silent on climate change ...

Established NGOs suggest different approaches to address climate change. Nevertheless many approaches share a shortened critique of capitalism, often stemming from the wish to sensitise people to climate change with easily digestible narratives. This includes the critique of certain governments or corporations or the differentiation between good and bad corporations.

But this holds the danger of losing sight of the structural conditions under which corporations operate within the capitalist system and the interchangeability of certain companies. For example in the run up to Paris, parts of the climate movement seek to focus on so called "Corporate Climate Criminals". They rightly argue that oil based corporations have gained massive profits by their climate destructive activities<sup>7</sup> and that they have gained influence within the climate negotiations. But we should be wary as this creates the impression that climate change is merely the "fault" of these corporations. Because in the end, they only fulfill their dirty roles in the global market economy that we in the Global North profit from. Our current model of production and consumption is based on fossil fuel energy, expansion and exploitation. This applies not only to large oil and coal corporations. Personifying corporate leaders as climate criminals without further social analysis is a form of a shortened critique of climate politics.

Simultaneously, states and NGOs propagate to combine ecological consumption with green technologies (such as energy saving light bulbs, green energy). That is reasonable, because our daily routines remain locked in firmly established patterns. It is important to reflect on one's own involvement in social structures. That applies to power based gender and race relations as well as socio-ecological ones. To think about consumption decisions and raise the issue is totally fine. And buying organic products is not wrong.

However, this does not mean that current socio-ecological grievances are reducible to individual consumption patterns and solvable by individual behaviour. Because there are certain structural, political, social and economic mechanisms in place that promote particular individual behavioural patterns and systematically curtail or prevent others. For example people who live in an area without public transport and have to go to the doctor or

7 Worldwide a large share of fossil fuel reserves is owned by 90 corporations that in turn are responsible for 65% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, <http://carbonmajors.org>

go shopping do not have the choice other than using a car. This relationship between individual choices and structural conditions can be described by the term “imperial way of life”.

The idea of social change that is deep but does not hurt anyone remains a LOHAS<sup>8</sup> dream. Hybrid cars and organic supermarkets that do not break with fundamental capitalist patterns, will not bring radical transformation towards different societal relationships with nature. Campaigns aiming at changing individual behaviour individualise the approaches to the crisis of societal relationships with nature, thus radical transformations towards fundamentally other models of production and consumption become an utopia.

## ... and even catastrophic narratives do not help

Even within the critical part of the environmental movement views on what is the best narrative about climate change differ. But the differences lie less in the analysis of climate change as an expression of fundamentally destructible societal relationships with nature, but more in questions about the strategic direction of discursive intervention. In order to gain public interest, to gain access to (mainstream) media and funding, the future catastrophe is drawn up with drastic images and scaremongering scenarios. As time is running out, a menace is required in order to create pressure. In this logic the future floods for example are used to put a spotlight on the imminent danger of climate change – even if causalities behind this are much more complicated and nuanced. The evocation of an imminent catastrophe is supposed to point to the urgency of the climate crisis. But it is questionable whether such a politics of playing with fear is helpful for dealing with climate change in an emancipatory manner. Taking a look at other topics and issues, it is clear that such an appeal to fear usually leads to an expansion of state authority and repressive politics and a general legitimisation of any kind of project done in the name of security.

This generates the feeling that only if we act now the imminent catastrophe could possibly be averted. For this (almost) nothing is off limits. This means that seemingly quick and easy dominant solutions (top-down, technocratic measures, market mechanisms, corporate driven solutions) are promoted rather than emancipatory ones (participation, democratisation, social negotiations, self determination and decentralisation etc.). There is seemingly no time for a radical critique of capitalism, an analysis of the deep causes of the catastrophic societal relationships with nature and for processes of socio-ecological transformations.

The same applies for the emphasis on the futurity of the ca-

tastrophe. In light of the future catastrophe, current crisis-ridden and exploitative relations to nature seem relatively better and therefore relatively acceptable. This mirrors the fundamental eurocentric character of the climate debate. By focusing on the future catastrophe, already real and existing catastrophes in the Global South (destruction of livelihoods, starvation, floods and droughts) become invisible or at least relativised.

Reflecting on the orientation of the climate narrative and the strategic use of catastrophic scenarios does not mean trivialising catastrophic effects of current societal relationships with nature. They rightly have disastrous effects. But it is a matter of seriously dealing with the function of the hegemonic climate discourse and one's own role in it. Is a “catastrophe discourse” making the need for necessary deep social changes more obvious? Or does such a discourse exclude emancipatory approaches?

## What do we need? Transformation!

Above we have explained why from our point of view it is problematic to portray climate change as a mere problem of excess levels of greenhouse gas emissions. We also explained that drastic reductions of greenhouse gases at a global level have only occurred in the case of economic crises or during change in former Eastern block. Do we have to then wish for further economic crises or for volcanic eruptions<sup>9</sup> if we want to take CO2 emissions reductions seriously? As economic crises and volcanic eruptions often have devastating consequences for many people, this cannot be the aim of an emancipatory movement. Besides this, our abilities to create volcanic eruption are fortunately limited. We need something different than volcanic eruptions and much more than organic vegetables - we need a fundamental social transformation.

Such a transformation will mean massive cuts in our consumption model and our way of life. As such, we will not all be winners in this process. However, such a transformation does not have to be in opposition to a good life („Buen Vivir“) for all. We insist that the transformation has to be a socio-ecological one. This is because history and experiences from other countries of the world tell us that socially speaking, progressive leaders (such as some Latin American governments) go for strategies of appropriating “nature” that result in numerous form of domination that take away people's sovereignty to shape their societal relationship with nature. And even in the so-called “real” socialist societies, nuclear power plants, large dams and smog exist. Even in a much more socio-ecological society humans are dependent on using and appropriating “nature”. The question is how we shape

<sup>8</sup> This term describes people whose way of life is informed by an awareness to health and the principles of sustainability (Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability).

<sup>9</sup> Large volcanic eruptions like that of Laki in Iceland, have over years, lowered global temperatures.



these societal relationships with nature – in a repressive-dominant manner or somehow else. Behind an industrial agricultural plantation lies another form of access to “nature” - the organically operating subsistence farming family. Similar differences exist between a nuclear power plant and a community run wind farm.

In the face of rising inequalities such as 800 million people without adequate food<sup>10</sup> and in the light of rising poverty due to economic crises a system change is overdue. A broad, social-ecological transformation would not only offer answers to the climate crisis, but also address social inequalities. So how can the energy transition happen and how can industries and regions in the Global North be transformed or unravelled but not at the expense of workers? How can the mobility needs of everyone be met without massive use of environmentally destructive modes of transport such as aeroplanes or the expansion of private transport? How can we produce enough food for all people without the destruction of nature through agricultural production?

We have no perfect answer ready for all these questions. We think that we do not need or should not have such ready made answers: social models should not be drafted by a few but collectively developed. Even in the past the current common capitalist madness has not been planned with such detail by its adherents. It has been the result of historic developments and social disputes. Simultaneously, a socio-ecological transformation requires social consultation processes and struggles and we would like to begin with those immediately. In our view the following elements could be pointing in the right directions:

»» A far reaching socio-ecological transformation has to take the social inequalities between the Global North and Global South, as well as the inequalities within the Global North and Global South into account: even here in Germany not everyone is on the luxury cruise ship. Who can or wants to afford which kind of food, which kind of mobility or other consumer habits is decided along class lines.

»» All approaches treating “nature” as a commodity - the creation of new markets such as emissions trading, or ownership of resources (such as patents for genetic resources), or the speaking about “nature” in market-orientated language (environmental services) - have to be pushed back instead of strengthened. Non market forms of the use of nature (such as substance based agriculture and solidarity based agriculture) have to be kept and strengthened, as much as democratically organised forms of socio-ecologically uses of “nature” (such as decentralised structures for energy generation).

»» Part of the democratisation of societal relationships with nature is that those mostly affected by certain types of the appropriation of nature (such as mining, dams or monocultures) should get to decide primarily if or how this can happen.

»» Approaches that are primarily of technocratic nature to address the social and ecological problems, are to be viewed very critically. Technological efficiency gains are not wrong per se, but they do not address fundamental social structures, and these are the ones that count. Moreover, a technocratic orientated discourse can hinder such changes due to the motto “efficiency revolution will solve the problem”.

»» Fossil fuels have to remain in the ground.

»» A serious reflection on the transition or unwinding of certain industry sectors – for example the automobile industry and arms industry. Doing this together with those working in such sectors and trade unions is essential.

»» Social transformations won't be possible without changing our understanding and our practise of work - away from paid full-time work to having more time for other forms of securing livelihoods, with time for care work and community work, fixing, do-it-yourself (DIY), subsistence approaches etc. We have to establish a different understanding of a “good life”, in which the quality of life is not determined by “having lots”, career, overseas travels just for the weekend or other things, but via social relations, meaningful work and social participation at the same time as meeting basic material needs. This cannot only broaden the temporal and social scope to drive social change, but it can also alter social values such as consumption and the growth paradigm which is the driving power for capitalism.

»» Worldwide there are numerous struggles that we in the Global North could only wish for – resistance against mining, the struggles of subsistence farmers for land rights and food sovereignty, against trade agreements, large dams and mega projects. Therefore it is also about strengthening such struggles and creating spaces in which social movements can share their experiences and learn from each other.

## Breaking with the existing order

In order to issue the necessary socio-ecological transformations, social movements discuss different strategies. Some insist on clearly confronting the system while others are more strategic - they try to forge alliances, to intervene into mainstream society and sow the seeds of their own political views in order

<sup>10</sup> Data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 2015 <http://www.fao.org/hunger/key-messages/en>

to change power relations. In the current situation we need probably both strategies. If we want to take the current relations (also relationships with nature) seriously and to no longer leave the the challenge of a radical change to others then we need a fundamental critique of current conditions and a positive utopia for social change as well as broad alliances for concrete steps to realise those. So the task is partially creating a dialogue between different movements and struggles, clarifying differences and contradictions, enduring them, working out commonalities, formulating common goals and coordinating actions. Besides the climate justice and labour movement (including established trade unions), those fighting against marginalisation, exclusion and racism (migrant movements, unemployment movements) and internationalist groups (such as those working together within the BUKO) should be central players in a common strategy. Otherwise social and ecological interests will be played out against each other. Broad based social movements could set priorities, radicalise and thus slightly change power relations.

Maybe social movements won't be able to initiate the long overdue processes for transformation themselves. Historically speaking there have always been situations in which fractures in the existing order occurred and when windows of opportunity for radical changes have popped up. In such moments what is needed is a social movement that is ready to face and challenge capitalist structures and that does not wait for some political solutions from leaders. For sure, the Kyoto Protocol and any follow up agreement(s) are not able to contain human induced climate change or other daily catastrophes. The summit in Paris cannot be the place for such a change. Due to the surrounding con-

ditions and the prefabricated mindset and manner of speaking about climate change, the articulation of a radical critique of the existing order will be almost impossible. Besides reference to the negotiations and the hope for the best possible outcome, Paris can only be a space to network and exchange and organise for future transformations.

Instead of eyeing the Paris negotiations, we have to conceredly name the false solutions which merely stabilise the system (market orientated mechanisms, technology dominated approaches) and talk across the different movements about real alternatives.

For this it is still necessary and important to break with the view that climate change is only an environmental problem and to clearly name climate change as a symptom of capitalism. It is not about fighting climate change with all available means, but about a radical transformation of the organisation of production modes and ways of life at the regional and global level. So addressing climate change and the associated societal relationships with nature is no environmental side issue that should be dealt with out of emancipatory courtesy. Rather, it epitomises the fundamental contradiction of capitalist penetration of the social order and the need for a deep restructuring of it. And exactly this could be the starting point for change.



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