

Participants were asked to address in written form, circulated to the other participants before the seminar, three questions:

- 1. Where is the crisis heading?*
- 2. Is “green capitalism” a solution or part of the problem?*
- 3. What is the most important concrete problem to which left strategy should develop a response in 2010?*

Stephen Gill

Global Organic Crisis and its Implications for the Lefts¹

The paradoxical and pregnant nature of the current global political situation involves far more than a crisis of capitalist accumulation: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”²

1) Where is the crisis heading?

The current conjuncture involves a multiplicity of intersecting and interrelated crises, i.e. a “global organic crisis” that goes beyond the deep challenges to macroeconomic policy as a result of the costs of gigantic bailouts of capital in the past 2 years.

A swift review of the present conjuncture reveals that morbid symptoms are global: intensified exploitation of human beings and nature by capital; fundamental issues of sustainability (partly reflected in the impasse over climate change); and intense global food and health crises linked to corporate domination of world agriculture.³ Related to the above is accelerated privatization of water, land, natural resources and public goods such as education and health systems: thus a global social crisis is exacerbated by these “new enclosures” and the expropriation of the “social commons”. In sum, this is much more than a crisis of capitalist accumulation or a necessary self-correction aided by macroeconomic intervention and bailouts. It reflects the contradictions of “market

¹ My contribution to this year’s NALD should be read in conjunction with what I wrote last year – this has been circulated earlier by the organizers.

² Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 1971, p 276.

³ The world food crisis involves global patterns of malnutrition – 25% of the world is obese or overweight; 25% is starving. See Robert Albritton, Let Them Eat Junk: How Capitalism Creates Hunger and Obesity, 2009.

civilization” – an individualistic, consumerist, privatized, energy-intensive and ecologically myopic, unequal and unjust pattern of lifestyle and culture which is currently dominant in world development.⁴

Where “the crisis” is heading will depend on the political struggles in response to the contradiction just alluded to: the intensified power and disciplines of capital (reinforced by disciplinary neo-liberalism and new constitutionalism) versus the need for conditions of secure and indeed progressive social reproduction and ecological sustainability. This global contradiction has important gender and racial dimensions. A majority of the world’s work, including caring work, is done by women and a majority of the world’s poor are women.⁵ Nevertheless, the forces of disciplinary neo-liberalism have retained the upper hand in defining the responses – the lefts have been relatively weak.

In my view the principal challenge for the Lefts in the coming decade is mobilising forces and arguments to address the global organic crisis and in so doing to continue to foster new forms of political agency involving both men and women – a new, diverse and creative post-modern Prince.⁶ Immediate challenges include specific policy responses to the costs of the gigantic bailouts, which neo-liberal governments will ultimately seek to download on the backs of ordinary people in the form of wage cuts, reductions in social benefits and health expenditures, privatisation of education and other measures connected to their “exit strategies”.

2. Green capitalism?

Emergency measures as just undertaken by the G8 only occur when the capitalist market system is threatened, not to deal with social needs or the sustainability of the biosphere. Various proposals for green capitalism should be judged in terms of whether they address not only specific ecological challenges, but also the general crisis of social reproduction and livelihood which compounds the ecological problem – in short the global organic crisis. Indeed, much of the current problems of global starvation are linked to the shift to production away from food grains to heavily subsidized biofuels over the past decade – this has massively

⁴ Pentagon strategic doctrine since the 1990s has been premised on “full spectrum dominance” (ability to dominate all adversaries in all aspects of warfare and surveillance) and sustaining the global disparities that favour dominant US interests -- in an unequal world increasingly divided between the “haves and have-nots.”

⁵ According to the UN Population Fund, the single biggest cause of global health inequalities – as well as the principal cause of death for women – is childbirth.

⁶ See Stephen Gill, Power and Resistance in the New World Order, 2008.

increased the world food prices so that the world's poor cannot afford to buy food.

Of course it is desirable that capital is constrained from completely reckless exploitation of global resources and is forced to use energy more efficiently. However green capitalism seems entirely compatible with the prevailing forms of consumerist growth and commodified desire associated with market civilization, even though such consumption might be reconciled with lower levels of fossil fuels use, lower amounts of chemical fertilisers, and the introduction of more renewable sources of energy. It can also go with wider use of genetically modified seeds and new technologies of control over life-forms, e.g. feedlots and hormones to feed meat-based diets.

Further, green capitalism is characterized by the contradiction between private accumulation and enclosure of the social commons and social needs. Indeed the question of intellectual property rights is at the heart of the impasse between the global North and the global South in the climate change negotiations. Private corporations want rents for their technologies which poorer countries can ill afford to pay. Green capitalism will do very little therefore to address the intensification of economic and social insecurity of a majority of people throughout the globe. The left arguments should be based on the view that technologies to ameliorate environmental problems should be global public goods – not as mechanisms of control by corporations, codified by intellectual property rights in new constitutional organisations such as the WTO.

3) What is the most important concrete problem to which left strategy should develop a response in 2010?

“Tax struggle is the oldest form of class struggle” (Karl Marx)

Here the key question is: Who pays for the bailouts, and what are the real costs of the bailout strategies? The G8 strategy will attempt to restore the principal aspects of disciplinary neo-liberalism and force adjustments on to the backs of working people in the form of lower wages, privatization of public services and health, etc, in short an assault on workers, public goods and the social commons.

What will this mean? In North Atlantic countries about 70% of workers are in services, many in public services now threatened with further privatization. However, many remain sympathetic to the argument that G7 leaders can resolve the crisis and return to “normalcy”, indeed many “protected” workers are shielded from some of the worst effects of the crisis (i.e. partly as a result of Keynesian automatic stabilizers in Europe)

– whereas insecurity is increasing for the vast majority of workers worldwide, who are “unprotected”.⁷

The question of “normalcy” is therefore a global question and its return means “exit strategies” and the renewal of disciplinary neo-liberalism – in ways that will deepen the global organic crisis. Thus the lefts should argue that the world truly has a choice – the economic emergency measures could have been targeted in ways that would have been less costly, more socially efficient, e.g. strengthening public goods for the social, health and educational commons, and for promoting democratic control over the commanding heights of the economy so that they are also made less risky and more stable. A first step would be to advocate much more progressive and fair taxation (e.g. particularly for the top 20% of wealthy people), crack down on tax evasion and offshore centres, and promote tax regimes and pricing strategies designed to channel production towards more socially and ecologically useful ends. The global organic crisis also mandates strategies for global redistribution with a qualitative component (e.g. to provide the means to healthier global food and improvements in medical care).

In other words, Lefts need policies that to promote a new “common sense” in ways that not only fundamentally challenge the hegemonic capitalist concepts, but that redefine the credibility of government in terms of sustainable, equitable and just policies to meet social needs and enlarge the social commons – also showing how this will provide greater security and freedom for the majority.

⁷ The idea of an early return to such “normalcy” is delusional in light of the global financial situation which is far worse than G20 leaders can admit publicly. Moreover the “normal” of the past few decades has meant not only a deep crisis of social reproduction but also relentless environmental destruction, ever-increasing and obscene levels of inequality, and not least, global economic stagnation.