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Eco-socialism or no socialism – a shift in the coordinates for the left

Keypoints and hypotheses

Abstract

The socio-ecological approach can be integrated in the old issue of equal rights: the concern for stable ecological systems refers to the vertical equality between current and future generations needing sound fundamentals, and the current distribution refers to the horizontal equality between classes, regions and so on.

In the 21st century there will be eco-socialism or no socialism, because of the necessity to secure the foundations of mankind. The essential news: by climate change there are **DEAD**lines, and by developments like uncurbed climate change also the “rich” have to lose a lot. And also this is new situation shifting the parallelogram of power. The concrete alternatives and real paths of transformations are weak points.

The unsustainable level of social metabolism (input from nature and “output” to nature) in the developed countries together with the broad industrialisation of emerging countries cause new situations. Stable solutions for the fundamental resource and emission problems are probably are possible only by “fair” distribution (on global and various other levels) and solidarity. "Simultaneous" solutions for many problems – resources, emissions, distribution and development - are necessary.

Joint production often forgotten is crucial for the adequate socio-ecological transition. Revised concepts of rationality and (eco-)efficiency has to be agreed therefore. For an “optimal” or sufficient development the adoption of limits on the input side (resources) and limits on the output side with (complex) implications of emissions and waste a revival of democratic **planning** will be on the agenda

Referring to Feuerbach Marx mentioned that philosophers interpreted the world in different ways but the point is to change it. The eco-socialist addition would be **not only to change the world but to protect it.**

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Additionally to factors of crisis in “traditional” spheres of capitalism events like the flood in Pakistan, the fires in Russia, Fukushima or the price rallies for food and commodities announce a (future) fundamental crisis in the ecological basis of society. So there is the hypothesis: In the 21st century there will be eco-socialism or no socialism, because of the necessity to secure the foundations of mankind. The essential news: by climate change there are **DEAD**lines, and by developments like uncurbed climate change also the “rich” will have to lose a lot. And also this is new situation shifting the parallelogram of power.

There is some literature on analysing environmental issues from a view of political economy, better: political ecology: James O’Connor, Foster, Burkett, Benton, and others; in Germany the debate began earlier in the beginning eighties. Economic accounting on material and energy basis could be found at Otto Neurath. Also Bogdanov and Bukharin belonged to an almost forgotten strand of socialist thinking; not to forget the seminal Podolinsky in the eighties of the 19th century. Many regions have their specific discourses, also in China there has been an broad eco-Marxist tradition little known in the West (I especially want to refer to a rather new book of Huan Qingzhi (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization).

But: “... the absence of a strong socialist left is reflected in a corresponding lack of coherence in eco-socialist theory”¹

“The major strengths of eco-socialism – as an alternative to green capitalisms – lies in the socio-political criticism of the ecological maladies of capitalism. But eco-socialism is less successful when it comes to promoting the rationality and attractiveness of its institutional design for a red-green replacement.”² The concrete alternatives and real paths of transformations are weak points: “... the problem of ‘transformation agency’ is far from

¹ Panitch Leo, Leys Colin (2006): coming to terms with nature – Socialist Register 2007. Preface p. IX

² Huan Qingzhi: Eco-socialism in an era of capitalist globalization bridging the west and the east. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P.4

resolved.”³ So the offer of plausible and coherent eco-socialist concepts and transformational paths has to be improved.

Basically we know the drive and self- accelerating speed of M-C-M’ and we know further that the implicated “...capital accumulation system – including the externalization of social costs on the poor, less developed countries, and the planet at large that goes with this system of accumulation has increasingly become a hindrance to human development and even to the survival of humanity (along with most ‘higher’ species)”⁴. A central role belongs to the social discounting, which practically is similar to the profit rate: “If the pollutant’s lifetime is very long as compared to the time horizon of the decision maker, for example for some greenhouse gases or radioactive wastes, the standard result of capital theory is completely reversed”⁵

Risk in the mainstream economic justification is a reward for the profit but the fundamental implications of global risks are attached to whole mankind. Basic concepts to analyze capitalist market economies in regard to sustainability are information deficiencies about material flows and possibilities of recycling, externalization of costs, deregulation of trade, impacts of automation - economies of scale and economies of scope.

Blocking factors on the path to circular economy firstly are contra productive incentives (material resource prices not reflecting full “costs”, inappropriate taxes), lock in, path dependency, sunk costs, rebound effects, and oligopolistic market power of incumbents. Environment is also in new sphere of accumulation of capital producing new “vested interested” of half-way solutions for remaining within the paradigm (E. g. incineration of waste)

The question if or to what degree an “**eco-capitalism**” is possible is not decided definitely until now. Anyway a much more socio-ecologically regulated capitalism hardly would remain the capitalism we know up to now. When the possibilities of capitalist systems to integrate resource and environmental systems are exhausted the question of the development towards

³ Huan Qingzhi: Eco-socialism in an era of capitalist globalization bridging the west and the east. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 4

⁴ Foster Bellamy (2009): The ecological revolution – making peace with the planet. P. 13

⁵ Baumgaertner Stefan, Faber Malte, Schiller Johannes (2006): Joint Production and Responsibility in ecological economics. P. 342

eco-socialism is on the agenda. Then a change and transition is necessary and an eco-social path is real. Further business as usual will be an “utopian fantasy”⁶, some mean that is true already to-day.

It would be a miracle if the “invisible hand” via the “efficient” capital market of Eugene Fama (Prices reflect all available relevant information) would achieve by chance only one target within the complex setting. It would be still an even bigger miracle if this “invisible hand” would achieve necessary essential targets.

New conditions of the first decades of the 21st century are:

a. The unsustainable level of social metabolism (input from nature and “output” to nature) in the developed countries together with the **broad industrialisation** of emerging countries (and so big parts of the world) implicates unprecedented increases of material flows with unprecedented implications on the resource and emission side. Currently we face peak oil, and we will face peak of almost everything on the input side of economy. On the output side there are emissions with various implications most important the green house gases causing climate crisis.

b. Non-linear, rather sudden developments, which could embrace disasters, are possible – maybe combined with “traditional” economic **crisis**. Because the food sector is very sensible and is determined by energy development to a high degree these field can probably be the cause of systemic crisis.

c. The implications of accumulation of greenhouse gases parallel to accumulation of capital will cause the most heavy challenges for mankind in history till now in this century. If **deadlines** would be missed irreversible processes would question the basics of existence of mankind.

d. **Stable solutions** for the fundamental resource and emission problems are probably are possible only by “**fair**” **distribution** (on global and various other levels) and solidarity.

⁶ Foster Bellamy (2009): The ecological revolution – making peace with the planet. P.259 (citing Raskin)

e. "**Simultaneous**" solutions for many problems – resources, emissions, distribution and development - **are necessary** and possible.

Production and social development require on the one hand some intact local and regional ecosystems (e.g. water) and on the other hand also intact global ecosystems (e.g. climate); some limits and tipping points on the local/regional and global level must not be exceeded.

The basic material flow side of existing economic systems mainly is linear:

Resources ==> *production* ==> goods +waste+emissions (bads)

A fundamental principle of an alternative system overcoming the problems on the input AND output side is to close the cycle resulting in a recycling society or (material) **circular economy** (This does not mean autarky).

Joint production and the implicated system of economic and ecological causations, the “socialization” of production is an often forgotten fact, it is crucial for the adequate socio-ecological transition: “A thorough understanding of joint production and its consequences is... an indispensable prerequisite for taking responsible action that meets the challenge of sustainability.”⁷

We need a “revised concept of efficiency which takes into account all inputs and outputs of a particular productive activity (and not just those are measured in the profit margins in particular enterprises”⁸ This requirement can be delivered by combined ecological-economical input-output schemes.

Revised concepts of rationality and (eco-)efficiency has to be agreed therefore. For an “optimal” or sufficient development the adoption of limits on the input side (resources) and limits on the output side with (complex) implications of emissions and waste require a revival of democratic **planning** will be on the agenda

⁷ Baumgaertner Stefan, Faber Malte, Schiller Johannes (2006): Joint Production and Responsibility in ecological economics. P. 339

⁸ Wallis Victor: Socialism and technology – an sectoral overview. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 48

Basic features of eco-socialism are “Recognition of the inherent value of nature” and the “adoption of economic limits to large scale material production and consumption”⁹

Leading principles are “concern for long-term species survival” and the “assumption that no portion of the human race is entitled to deny any other portion of it, on any pretext, the conditions for a decent life.”¹⁰

The socio-ecological approach can be integrated in the old issue of equal rights: the concern for stable ecological systems refers to the vertical equality between current and future generations needing sound fundamentals, and the current distribution refers to the horizontal equality between classes, regions and so on.

And “unless eco-socialism is sex-gender literate, it cannot even begin to function as a democratic politics”¹¹

The transformation from capitalism to socialism is a difficult task; the transformation from capitalism to eco-socialism even is more difficult. The climate crisis is the most important part of a multifaceted ecological crisis. Anyway a substantial ecological revolution can be only part of a larger social revolution.¹²

Important ecological commons like the atmosphere are not limited by nation-states. The former slogan “think globally act locally” has to be transformed in “both think globally and act locally”¹³

We cannot confine to have some nice niches or build some eco-socialist villages; “islands of sustainability” can be poles in the disseminating eco-social solutions but efficient permanent solutions have to be global or almost global. So there cannot be a strategic coexistence

⁹ Huan Qingzhi: Eco-socialism in an era of capitalist globalization bridging the west and the east. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 6

¹⁰ Wallis Victor: Socialism and technology – a sectoral overview. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 60

¹¹ Salleh Ariel: How the ecological footprint is sex-gendered – implications of eco-feminism for an eco-socialist theory and practice. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P.141

¹² Foster Bellamy (2009): The ecological revolution – making peace with the planet. P. 263

¹³ Huan Qingzhi: Eco-socialism in an era of capitalist globalization bridging the west and the east. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 4

between sustainable regions and not-sustainable ones. In older words: “eco-socialism” in one land does make sense strategically

Some to-do list:

The detailed institutional design of eco-socialism still has to be developed.

The adoption of the value of nature and its diversity as prerequisite for future development has to be combined with the labour theory of value.

A weak point is the identification of the subjects of these transformations. - We can ask for power and domination, and inequality in the environmental space. We can see causations, impacts, and contributions for solutions differentiated along classes and other distributional criteria.

The ecological imperative of Hans Jonas is: Act so that the implications are compatible with the permanence with genuine human life on earth¹⁴. Referring to Feuerbach Marx mentioned that philosophers interpreted the world in different ways but the point is to change it. The eco-socialist addition would be **not only to change the world but to protect it**.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Handle so, dass die Wirkungen deiner Handlungen verträglich sind mit der Permanenz echten menschlichen Lebens auf Erden.

¹⁵ Sarkar Saral: Prospects for eco-socialism and technology – an sectoral overview. In: Huan Qingzhi (ed) (2010): Eco-socialism as politics – rebuilding the basis of our modern civilization. P. 217

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