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Death or Renewal: Is the Climate Crisis the Final Crisis?

Is This the “Inevitable” Collapse of Capitalism?

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pessimism—are irrelevant luxuries. For one has to cope anyway with the question: ... Now what?” (Goodman 1962; 154–5)

Will the workers and the oppressed face the question and make the choice of a new society? That is not inevitable. Certainly it is not inevitable before a terrible crash occurs. But it is **possible**, which is the basis for **hope**. For the minority of anti-capitalist, anti-state, ecosocialist, radicals, this is not a matter of prediction but of commitment. For everyone, as Kropotkin wrote, “*The choice lies with you!*”

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Classical socialists, both anarchists and Marxists, have written of the eventual end of capitalism—either through a popular revolution creating a new society or through the self-destruction of capitalism. Global warming raises the question of whether humanity is now facing such a possible total crisis, of choosing between socialism or social ruin.

Recently a friend sent me an article by Simon Lewis, a professor of global change science at the University College of London. Its title (Lewis 2021) was, “*Canada is a warning: more and more of the world will soon be too hot for humans*” and its subtitle was, “*Without an immediate global effort to combat the climate emergency, the Earth’s uninhabitable areas will keep growing.*”

This led me to think of the apocalyptic warnings of the socialist tradition, the most well-known, perhaps, being Rosa Luxemburg’s “socialism or barbarism.” In 1878, Friedrich Engels wrote that the bourgeoisie was “*a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin...If the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions.*” (Engels 1954; 217–8) Capitalism’s “*own productive forces...are driving the whole of bourgeois society towards ruin or revolution.*” (228)

Marx began his 1848 **Communist Manifesto** by claiming, “*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles...that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.*” (2013; 60–61) So, there is an historic choice between “revolutionary re-constitution” or “common ruin.” (This raising of two possible outcomes seems to be contradicted by the Manifesto’s later statement—about the capitalist class, “*Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.*” [73] I will not discuss whether Marx was a determinist, and, if so, of what kind.)

This was also an anarchist concept, integrating the problems of capitalism and its state. In 1898, Peter Kropotkin concluded

The State—Its Historic Role, “Death—or renewal! Either the State for ever, crushing individual and local life, taking over in all fields of human activity, bringing with it all its wars and domestic struggles for power...which only replace one tyrant by another, and inevitably at the end of the development there is—death! Or the destruction of States, and new life starting again in thousands of centers on the principle of the lively initiative of the individual and groups and that of free agreement. The choice lies with you!” (1987; 60)

Climate Cataclysm

It may be argued that these predictions of “death” and “ruin” (if there is no popular revolution) are limited to capital and the state, to the economy and politics, and **not** to the ecological environment. But these are not distinct systems, any more than economics and war are distinct. (Price 2010) Capitalism is driven to expand its production, to accumulate, to grow quantitatively, to amass profits—under the pressure of local and international competition. The states which maintain capitalism must serve this drive for growth. States themselves have drives toward greater power over their own people and against other national states. This drive of industrial capitalism and its state to ever greater expansion must come in conflict with the needs of ecological balance and a stable (if qualitatively evolving) web of life. Marx was well aware of the destructive effects of capital accumulation on the natural environment (Foster 2000). Both Marx and Kropotkin advocated a new society which ecologically integrated industry and agriculture, town and country. (Although an anarchist, I am not addressing the important differences between Marxist and anarchist programs.) As an anarchist, Murray Bookchin developed a concept of “social ecology,” which he summarized as “anarchism or annihilation.”

ism or by a superior society. But the latter will not be possible without the active and purposeful intervention of working-class subjectivity... Without this, capitalism will rejuvenate and will enter a new phase in which its domination over labor will be ever greater and more terrible.” (Carchedi 2018; 70)

He does not consider whether humanity could survive the kind of destruction of World War II, which revived world capitalism, but this time with more advanced technology (not only nuclear bombs either). Nor does he discuss the ecological and climate disasters which industrial society is now facing. However, he may be right, that a “new phase of capitalism” of a totalitarian sort (or perhaps a neo-feudalism?) might survive the presently threatened level of “ruin.”

He is also right that everything depends on the level of popular consciousness. The working class and all the oppressed must come to understand the danger which humanity faces if capitalism continues. And they would have to want a new and “superior” society, of freedom, ecological balance, mutual aid, equality, creative work, participatory democracy, and an end to capitalism, states, classes, and all forms of gender, racial, and other oppression. With their hands on the means of production, distribution, communication, and services, as the majority of the people, the workers have the potential power to end the old society and create a new one. They need to realize that they have a momentous choice.

It is a choice and not a matter of prophecy. In 1961, Paul Goodman (then the most well-known of US anarchists) received a questionnaire from a college journal. Its first question was “Do you believe there will be a nuclear war?” Goodman responded, “You ask for probabilities and predictions. I am neither able nor willing to give them....In such vital issues as you raise, we do not want a test, we want a state of affairs to become and be; it is incumbent on us to make it be....When one is faced with [such] problems, predictions—or sentiments of optimism or

globe to beyond levels of human survivability. The outburst of a pandemic too toxic to get under control in time. The collapse of world capitalism to a degree worse than the Great Depression. Any combination of the above.

In a recent book on an *“anarchist theory of the modern state,”* Eric Laursen concludes that an anarchist transformation *“is not just a socially desirable outcome to work toward, but an existential necessity”* (Laursen 2021;17). *“Today with catastrophic climate change looming, we are fighting for more than a just society; we are fighting for survival.”* (47)

So long as capitalism and the state exist, no matter how peaceful and prosperous in any one period, there remains a threat that “death” or “ruin” will occur. To speak of this “threat” is not the same as predicting “inevitable” outcomes. Humanity lives under the Sword of Damocles unless it does something about it.

The Marxist political economist Guglielmo Carchedi examines the long downturn of world capitalism and its trend toward stagnation, through temporary ups and down. He ascribes this long trend to the tendency of the rate of (real) profit to fall, although others would emphasize the growth of semi-monopolies. He believes that for capitalism to rejuvenate itself would require something like what was done to get out of the Great Depression. This included the destructiveness of a world war, massive armaments production, and the looting of the environment.

Carchedi asks, *“Are we approaching an inevitable breakdown, the end of capitalism? This is not in the nature of the beast. Lacking a truly revolutionary change, capitalism will exit this long downward secular period. But first capital will have to be massively destroyed, in both the financial and productive spheres....There is Gramsci’s 1930 reflection...‘The old is dying [but] the new cannot be born.’...The present phase of capitalism in the West is increasingly exhausting its capacity to reproduce itself. It is dying. It might be replaced by a new phase of capital-*

According to Professor Lewis, *“...Extreme heatwaves are more likely and scientists can now calculate the increase in their probability. For example, the 2019 European heatwave that killed 2,500 people was five times more likely than it would have been without global warming. In most places, extreme heatwaves outside the usual range for a region will cause problems, from disrupting the economy to widespread mortality....Yet in places in the Middle East and Asia something truly terrifying is emerging: the creation of unliveable heat.”*

There will a growth of regions where the heat will regularly go beyond the range in which humans (and other organisms) can live. There will be droughts, fires, storms, flooding of coasts, loss of agriculture, shortages of water for drinking and farming, all resulting in massive migrations across national boundaries, and various societal conflicts and wars. (The US military has been studying these trends, even as politicians look the other way.)

Humanity has the science and technology to limit the damage caused by generations of basing industry on carbon fuels. Lewis writes,

“What can governments, companies and citizens do? First, cut off the supply of ever more extreme heatwaves by halving carbon dioxide emission this decade, then reaching net zero emissions by 2050. Second, prepare for the inevitable heatwaves of the future. Emergency public health planning is the initial priority....Heatwaves intensify structural inequalities. Poorer neighborhoods typically have fewer green spaces and so heat up more, while outdoor workers, often poorly paid, are especially vulnerable...underscoring the importance of public health planning. ...

“...New regulations are needed to allow buildings to keep cool and for transport systems, from roads to trains, to be able to operate under much higher temperature extremes....The final task is future-proofing agriculture and the wider ecosystems we all ultimately rely on.

“...Stabilising the climate by 2050 is well within the timeframe of one working lifetime, as is adapting to allow us all to prosper in this new world. There is no time to lose.”

Increasingly, heads of governments and of multinational corporations have recognized—in words—the dangers of climate change. (The biggest exception has been in the USA, where one of two parties has persistently denied its existence.) It is conceivable that the world bourgeoisie will wise up enough to do something effective about global warming—if not to stop it altogether, then at least to mitigate it, to slow it down. Has it?

Professor Lewis concludes, *“Given these immense challenges how are governments doing on climate adaptation? Very poorly.”* This should not be surprising. There are too many vested interests in maintaining the current dependence on fossil fuels. Our whole technological society is primarily fueled by them. The less-industrialized, poorer, nations are even more reliant on coal and oil for energy. Not to mention all the commodities which use plastics (made from petroleum). Meanwhile, mechanized factories-in-the-field agriculture uses petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizer plus fuel for its machines. Our whole technological society would have to be transformed from top to bottom in order to be free of fossil-fuels and end global warming.

Economically, the petroleum industry is one of the biggest, most powerful, sections of world capitalism. It will not be abolished without an enormous fight. And, to repeat, even if capitalist society could completely abandon fossil fuels, it would still have a need to constantly expand, which must clash with the needs of a balanced world ecology. As Engels had written, *“If the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place.”*

Predictions

Predictions have their limits. It may be argued that, after all, time has passed since the classical socialists predicted that capitalism would end in “barbarism,” “death,” or “ruin,” if not overthrown. Yet capitalism and its state have not been overthrown nor yet ended in destruction. There have been great disasters, including two world wars, the Great Depression, the rise of Naziism and of Stalinism (with their slave labor and mass killings), enormous famines, continuing if smaller wars, and pandemics, among other forms of mass suffering. Yet there have also been benefits, such as the end of European fascist governments, mostly replaced by bourgeois democracies. Most imperial colonies have won political independence. South African apartheid and US Jim Crow segregation have been defeated. The Great Depression and World War II were followed by thirty years of unparalleled prosperity (in the imperialist countries, anyway)—which only ended around 1970. The world got through the Cold War without a nuclear war. And there have been enormous, qualitative, advances in science and technology. Overall, capitalism has proven to be flexible and regenerative, getting through crises and surviving.

All this is true, although how we judge the time scale is relative. Modern humans have existed for half a million years, agriculture for about 10 thousand years. The preconditions for socialism (or destruction) have only existed for less than two centuries: mass production technology, the modern working class, and a world market. That capitalism has survived for this relatively brief period of time, without either “ruin or revolution,” “death or renewal,” is no final proof that it will continue to do so.

After all, it only requires **some** world-destroying set of events to happen **once** to risk ending human civilization. One nuclear war would do it. Even a large war using non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The accelerating heating of the