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Climate Policy - even worse than its reputation

The Berlin bit of „Gruppen gegen Kapital und Nation“ wrote the pamphlet in German and started distributing it in late 2019 on the occasion of climate protests. Hence, we are using examples from Germany - we believe however that readers will recognise analogies in other countries.

People around the world are concerned about global warming. And rightly so: scientific research has been providing increasingly more dramatic prognoses about the immense damage caused by climate change. The effects have already been noticeable for quite a while now. Yet, astonishingly little is being done to reduce the use of fossil fuels or other sources of greenhouse gases: indeed, hardly any state has actually decreased its emissions. Furthermore, measures declared on a national and international level lag far behind the objectives set by the Paris Agreement.

The worldwide protests organised or inspired by Fridays for Future demand that political leaders deliver what they had pledged. This earned them quite a lot of praise and support; interestingly enough even from those criticised by the protesters. The situation is dire. It would thus be smart to consider who the protests were appealing to, and whether doing so makes any sense at all. The results of and reasons for 30 years of climate policy have proven that addressing the state is not a good strategy when attempting to save the biological basis for life on this planet.

Human beings and nature - what are they good for?

The word has spread: a lot will need to change if global warming is to be stopped. The starting point of climate policy was and still is capitalist companies - despite the many moralising appeals to consumers to stop going on holiday by plane and not buy avocados. The whole democratic society and its economic life (wages, taxes, state debt, strength of a currency and so much more) depends on the success/profit of these companies. No responsible government, neither left nor right, wants to change this fundamental set-up.

They all agree that the economy must flourish - with all the brutal consequences this entails. That is, companies want to earn more than what they spend on manufacturing their products. Purchase, production and sale are squeezed so that profit is generated (and constantly increasing, if possible). During the production phase, workers notice the effects of this when they have to up their performance. Companies deal with nature in the same way: they try to extract as much as possible at the lowest price. Production of energy and raw materials as well as waste management are cost factors for corporations, while poisoning the soil, the rivers and the atmosphere comes for free.

Recycling is done only when it is worth it, e.g. when raw materials are too expensive – but if not, then recycling is really not on a company's agenda. The same is true for energy saving: saving energy for the same output in goods is only done when and if it is worth it. Making ever more money is the aim, and in order to maintain this growth, production and energy consumption have to constantly increase as well. This is not due to the stupidity or greed of entrepreneurs or managers. Instead, it is caused by the organisation and the purpose of this economy: the increase of private profit through production for those who can pay for it.¹

The economy - what is it good for?

Politics is neither unaware, nor corrupt, nor conflict averse, when it fosters economic growth at people's and nature's expense. States rely upon capitalist production as a historically unparalleled source of power. No mode of production has ever granted so much wealth to a ruler, allowing this ruler to fulfill its aims. From the job centre to universities and the car registration offices: the state uses tax returns to keep society going – and thereby also to keep money making going. For this to work well and efficiently, states make sure that companies have access to enough reliable and cheap energy sources, whilst also ensuring that companies may use the whole world as a marketplace. Think about Germany with its rather successful car industry, selling its cars worldwide.

Other states have the same interest for their own economy. In the competition between states, every single one tries to subordinate others: when negotiating trade agreements, each one tries to gain as many advantages for their own economy as possible. Thereby, each state makes itself a means for its capitalist economy. It does so because with a strong economy, the political power of the state increases as well. The economic success of its companies is the state's decisive power tool in the competition between states for supremacy and subordination, i.e. in order for the state to assert itself against others. (This is why economic powerful states are usually the ones who rule the world). And vice-versa: a state's success in this competition is the basis for its national companies to strive globally.

Environmental protection - what's the value of waste?

It is commonly noted that this economic system drastically damages the environment. Increasing numbers of dying people or areas of land that can no longer be used are expressed as a financial burden to the national economy. While companies use people as well as the environment as free resources, the state takes measures to ensure that these assets remain available for its and the economy's use – that is why the state makes social and environmental policies in the first place.

But the state encounters a problem here: these policies are costly, they constitute “a burden on the economy” and they obstruct some profitable business opportunities – e.g. the ban on (unconventional) fracking in Germany. Hence, the question is on the table, whether the state can allow itself to implement policies that may restrict the economy. Sometimes, as a result, the government does nothing regarding the protection of the

environment. Instead, damages are either denied or played down in public. When the state does take environmental measures, it does so in a particular way: companies are given as much time as possible in order to adapt to the new requirements at the lowest cost possible. With time, some thresholds or limits might be defined and pollution might be given a price - through emission trading or a CO2 tax.

Climate policy - how much does the world cost?

When the governments of the world meet to do something about climate change, they are usually in disagreement. Firstly, states have fundamentally different positions with regards to how urgently action is required. This is because they differ in the levels of global warming which they find acceptable. For many small island states, a global temperature increase of 1.5 degrees celsius is too much. For countries like Russia, a 2 degree temperature increase may come with some hoped-for advantages. Countries are affected very differently by the consequences of climate change.²

Secondly, states follow different strategies for climate protection, which often contradict or hinder each other. This is because states may be very eager to follow some measures to protect the climate, whilst being reluctant to pursue other proposals. This mainly depends on how their national economy may benefit. For most industrialised states, depending on other countries for oil and gas has long been an annoying side effect of their energy policy. For these states, energy from sources other than oil and gas is very interesting - and that is for reasons completely unrelated to climate policy. Some governments strive to support and develop renewable energy sources in order to establish an independent energy provision for their national economies. The more independent from foreign energy providers a state becomes, the better it can bargain with supplier countries for lower oil and gas prices.

Once a new industry emerges from these deliberations, the economic consideration immediately kicks in, seeking to make it a winner in the export market. For instance, the German government until 2012 tried to do its part to support its nationally successful solar engineering to expand. However, Chinese solar technology proved to be more competitive. Thus, German solar energy manufacturing was no longer subsidised by the state. States gaining most of their income from gas and oil and transit countries for raw material are obviously in strong opposition to the new energy policies of the industrialised part of the world. Other states see an opportunity to at least gain a bit of rent from capitalist powers and their entrepreneurs by providing large areas of land for biomass and solar fields.

If a national economy has key industries - such as the car industry in Germany - then any measures, economic or otherwise, that might endanger said industry will be opposed. That's why, for example, different German governments from left to right have repeatedly rejected any of France's suggestions for further climate protection measures. The reaction was much different when the German car industry's pole position was contested: for example when China took advantage of climate issues, adapting its national electric car standards in order to help finally set up a car company with

global outreach. One of the biggest German car companies, Volkswagen, did not want to lag behind – sales opportunities in China and beyond being too promising. The German government was also on board, for instance by accelerating the expansion of charging stations for electric cars.

Conclusion - Heading into climate crisis with climate policy?

This is how climate policy works and continues to work. Measures that are disadvantageous for a state's national economy are simply avoided. Measures that contribute to its national economy, for example by opening up sales opportunities for its own "green" global market winners, are promoted. As always, technological progress is considered a means for further capitalist growth. Firstly, it is a means for the global dissemination of domestic products. Secondly, the hope is to come up with more innovations in the future: If some future invention "made in Germany" could attenuate or even prevent climate change or its consequences, any other difficult decision – like how strictly emissions should be limited – would be superfluous.

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, addresses all this, when she praises the climate protests for their honorable intentions, whilst also pointing out that "many things" need to be accounted for. "We must reconcile jobs and economic power with the goals of climate protection." One should not expect much else if the Green party were to take over: In his role as minister of the environment, Jürgen Trittin (Green party) was a revelation. Instead of the envisioned short-term phasing-out of nuclear energy, a decades-long guarantee for safe profits prior to the phasing-out was given to the operators. This, as well as rejecting French proposals for further climate goals, shows that the Green Party also keeps the interests of the national economy very much in mind.

So there is climate policy – and this is how it works in national capitalist economies. It is unlikely to avoid any tipping points. Thus, an environmental movement that turns to politics is mistaken and ineffective. Maybe climate policy will succeed in reducing damaging emissions. This is not very likely, though. And even if it does, it will come with all the side effects of modern politics described above. Thus, it is now the time to oppose the purposes and objectives of this political and economic system. Urging those with more political and economic power to "please try harder" is completely out of place.

1 See Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, a book we highly recommend; alternatively an introduction to capitalism (available only in German, for free): „Die Misere hat System: Kapitalismus“, download at <http://gegner.in>

2 The so-called tipping points will likely occur with a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees which will make the increase of the global temperature incalculable. This is a risk which states are taking into account when weighing their prospects.