

## **A CRITIQUE OF THE PARADIGM REGARDING HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN THE MAINSTREAM IN THE „GLOBAL NORTH“**

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The fact that the situation of the environment and its connection with social contradictions have become a threat to the existence of the world is now largely undisputed. Even deniers of climate change will accept that without changes in the mode of life and the method of production humankind would be faced with difficult problems. This implies that changes across all political and scientific camps are required as well as changes in the various fields of production and consumption and in social relations. At climate conferences or meetings of the elites, such as recently in Davos, these problems are expressed openly. The difference between the various currents of thoughts consists in determining the necessary directions of social reconstruction.

The problem becomes more complicated by the fact that in many parts of the world the construction and assurance of a decent life and the use of the positive results of the social and technological achievements of human civilization are almost inextricably linked to a growing consumption of natural resources. The ecological footprint of Europe and North America is not diminishing. The actual results of a more ecological form of production and consumption (such as the energy transition in Germany) are compensated by the changes in the structures of consumption, if not overcompensated. Although awareness of environmental and social problems is rising, solutions seem further away than ever.

How is this apparent contradiction between awareness and action explained? I suggest that there are four key elements comprising this contradiction. The first is between micro and macro fields of action; the second the discrepancy between growth and development processes; third, the power factors behind who defines the understanding of growth; and fourth, the interconnectivity of economic, ecological, and social processes.

At present, there are many small projects of activists trying to live in an ecologically just way at the micro level. But at the macro level – the nation-state or the European Union – different policies apply. Central to this is the understanding of growth, but also of social development. This results in a peculiar overlapping of different dimensions: growth is interpreted quite differently by different social actors. It appears in the social discussions above all as growth of indicators in money terms - thus as growth of the GDP, the income of the enterprises and the enterprise value. Financial markets become the basis for all measurement. The profits of the enterprises and the development of the enterprise value are criteria for the income of the management and the shareholders. The development of the GDP in turn legitimizes or delegitimizes government action. Growing revenues from the state budget appear to be a



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prerequisite for the stability of social services and thus for social peace. This leads to the myth of “green growth”: elites present growth in solely financial terms, assuming that more money can meet ecological needs.

In the economically and politically dominant classes, therefore, there is an urgent need for the presentation of growth. Since the living conditions of the other classes of the society in this capitalist constellation are largely determined by the decisions of these actors, the growth dogma becomes an instrument of discipline – growth hostile behavior, according to the allegation - would lead to a worsening of the living conditions of society. The increasing privatization of social security systems in the EU countries also has the effect that increasingly broad sections of the population are actually dependent on the growth of the capital yields. The growth dogma thus becomes an instrument which conceals the interests of the ruling circles and is intended to orient society towards a behavior corresponding to capital utilization.

This becomes understandable if we consider the economic sectors that would primarily be affected by ecological conversion: energy industry, transportation, agricultural economics and the military-industrial complex. These are areas which have to work with particularly high capital advances - and depend on a reliable reflux of funds. At the same time they have a special influence on political decisions from their position in the social reproduction process and are closely connected with politics. For the special case of Germany, specifically the automobile production, which is the backbone of the German export economy, would have to be named. The individual motorization as the guiding idea of the development of the infrastructure ultimately empties any attempt at a serious ecological change. While the technology used to produce cars can become more energy-efficient, replacing older polluting cars with newer “greener” ones – even electric cars – the other environmental and social costs of the automotive industry (roads, fuel, and precarious labour) remain intact and are externalized to the public.

The strategies emerging from this are thus contradictory by upholding the legitimizing force of the growth dogma and not broaching the issue of the redistribution in society on the one side and developing concrete measures to combat the obvious threats to mankind on the other.

They assume in a very traditional way that by means of a market-driven ecological modernization, the stimulating effects from the utilization of the capital can be realized in a resource-saving direction of production and consumptions. They start from the fiction that the market leads in its effects to a rational distribution of the resources and that through comprehensive information and rational behavior of the actors combined with appropriate incentives by the state in the given social framework the problems could be solved. Although this fundamental assumption is increasingly being called into question in the mainstream, especially since the global economic crisis in 2007 - 2010, it still dominates the political concept development. The transformation of all natural resources into private property, land



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grabbing, the extension of private property rights to any results of mental activity and the associated destruction of traditional forms of collective activity follows this logic. However, market regulation is always a regulation in retrospect. It requires resource consumption. As a result, such a strategy promotes the circumvention of the state regulations, as was recently announced in the case of the VW group: in order to meet the environmental requirements, the software used in the engines was manipulated. The thereby proven necessity of stricter regulation is then rejected by the reference to the growth-inhibiting effects. Although Volkswagen paid compensation in the US and its directors resigned following the emissions scandal, the structure of the company has remained the same. Within the prevailing system of property relations, costs are externalized while all gains still go to the capital and finance markets.

This circle can only be interrupted by generating growth in the sense described through redistribution. The attempts at ecological modernization and the reduction of social rights are not accidentally appearing together. The reduction of social security in the case of unemployment and the level of insurances for retirement provision, as well as the extension of fixed-term and low-paid employment, will compensate the costs for energy-related and other environmental-related measures. The compulsion to conclude private insurances for retirement provision or to invest in capital market products (shares, funds, etc.) at least temporarily increases growth margins even under the conditions of pressure on ecologically oriented investments and corresponding expenses for the reorganization of production. This side of financialization, however, increases proportionally the compulsion of generating interest on the capital contributed as social security from paid wages. In the long run, this path of ecological modernization does not solve the problem at all, but recreates it all over. The source of accumulation and growth is always the redistribution from the social to the capital sphere, as well as the redistribution from the regions of the "third world" into the metropolises. The problem is not solved, it is being relocated. What this can mean, the EU is currently experiencing through the influx of refugees. Ultimately, the growth paradigm is based on different forms of violence: either directly on the international level, or indirectly weakening domestic groups, for instance through cutting social security.

### **CAN THIS CYCLE BE SOLVED BY A GREEN NEW DEAL?**

Historically, economic, ecological and social changes have always been linked: new forms of working with nature have led to changes in the social order. Up to now, however, few governments have succeeded at stimulating changes in all three areas at once, even through socialist revolutionary means. The German Democratic Republic prior to 1989 could effectively solve some social problems, but not environmental ones, since its energy base was brown coal. The resulting environmental damage was one factor leading to the GDR's collapse, as

well as that of the Soviet Union. By contrast, the present-day EU promotes the greening of the economy, but is not able to address the resulting social problems.

The New Deal in the US actually meant a change in the direction and forms of social development. However, it was not an abstract social agreement on the objectives of politics and economy. The New Deal was a reflection of changed forces in the world and in society. Above all, it was the internationally organized workers' movement, which had appeared as a new serious power factor since 1917. Without the actions of the unemployed and the trade unions, the New Deal would hardly have been created in this way - even though this aspect is often suppressed. On which new power constellations could a Green New Deal be based? The concept of the Green New Deal, closely linked to the concepts of a "green social market economy" does not take this aspect into account. It is based on reason and does not question the structures that create "irrational" interests. It suggests a dynamic of economic development without the question of where this stimulus should come from if the stimuli of the free market are not to work. Forming the involvement of citizens and strengthening the power of the consumer can surely create a starting point for an actual turnaround. However, as long as the economic decision-making processes and the social power relations are not questioned, a fundamental change of direction for the societal natural conditions seems baseless. Growing social inequality transforms ecological reconstruction into strengthening the privileges of the upper class and is thus destabilizing the society. This destabilization provokes repression on the one hand and acceptance of classical growth patterns on the other.

If all current concepts of a solution to the ecological crisis are brought to their conclusion, they can only be effective if a broadly developed state regulation of economic activity takes effect. This leads, however, to the absurdity of the ideological basis of a free market economy. The starting point for economic policy decisions on an ecological transformation of the society must be supported by the unity of social, political, environmental and economic decisions. In addition to an active social policy, this unity demands above all a regulation of the economy supported by direct-democratic mechanisms. It is not enough just to change technology: it is crucial to change the entire approach to technology by giving people a moral basis to change themselves. The question "how do we want to live" must become the starting point of social policies. In order to make such a policy enforceable, a reduction of the financialization of economic life and, in this context, the democratization of property rights would be indispensable. Citizens need to collectively study the socio-ecological situation and take democratic control of public budget processes. Only a social-ecological transformation can be sustainable, because it reduces the constraints forced by the anti-ecological behavior of the economic actors, and makes the development of new "habits", the learning of the "good life" possible.



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