

Calling All Realists

By Tom Athanasiou

The abortive “Earth Summit” in Johannesburg is already fading from our overtaxed memories. Indeed, as I write this, the conference of the week is COP8, the Eighth Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. And it may be a whole lot more important than Johannesburg, if only as a marker, a way to date another death of innocence. For COP8 comes only days after Al Qaeda, in its latest blast of apocalyptic warfare, destroyed a pair of Balinese discos, and with them hundreds of lives. We should not forget, those of us who follow the game of global environmental policy, that Johannesburg’s final preparatory conference was also in Bali, and only a few short miles away.

COP8 comes on a calendar no activist would have chosen. It’s not so much that the climate talks are in limbo, but that their progress—just now we’re waiting for Kyoto to enter into force, and looking forward to debating the globalization of the climate regime—seems abstract and even unreal against the background of an ever more gruesome world. The brutal post-boom economy, Al Qaeda’s mad utopianism, an imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq: together they announce a new and bloody chapter in the history of our strange civilization, and set a geopolitical context in which semi-rational negotiations like those at the COPs can only seem odd, brave, acts of faith.

As if the climate talks could someday really matter.

With the winds of war blowing, it’s a big if indeed. But what choice, really, do we have but to continue? War takes center stage, war and the economy, but ecological crisis is also gathering its forces, and the terms by which we’ll finally face it are becoming clear. Climate, of course, is our special subject, and a close reading of the

IPCC’s measured prose yields a clear, unwelcome conclusion: We don’t have much time.

Here’s the executive summary: The usual “best case scenario,” in which we manage to stabilize the atmosphere before its carbon dioxide concentration rises above 450 parts per million, assumes a “climate sensitivity” of 2.5°C, but this is looking to be an unrealistically low estimate. Furthermore, even if the climate sensitivity is that low, 450 ppm (which we’ll far overshoot in anything like “business as usual”) would yield a long-term temperature increase of 2°C, or even more once non-CO2 gases are included. Far from being “safe,” this, according to the IPCC’s Second Assessment Report, would mean significant ecosystem damage and loss of biodiversity (“whole forests may disappear”), major damage to food production in the most vulnerable parts of the world (60 to 350 million more people at risk of hunger), “significant loss of life” due to indirect health effects, particularly in developing countries, and a large increase in sea level.

And if the climate sensitivity turns out to be higher, all bets are off.

Which brings us back to the climate talks, now on the cusp of Kyoto’s entry into force, and to the problem: Despite a full decade of negotiations, COP8 still will not engage the climate crisis with anything like an appropriate level of urgency. No country, North or South, is prepared to accept new emission-reduction commitments, and even the long-deferred “review of adequacy” (wherein negotiators will have to face the paucity of their own accomplishments) is still not certain to occur.

But the signs of reckoning are everywhere. Only a few years remain before 2005, when the official negotiating schedule demands that attention turn to the post-Kyoto agreement. When it does, we’ll face a future unclouded by the ritual optimism

of the 1990's boom. And as the science is getting clearer, it's difficult to avoid the real issue—making it, or not making it, to a “soft landing corridor.”

And doing so on a world roiling with hatred and bombs.

So dispense with equivocation, and draw the obvious conclusions: We need a global treaty, an adequate one that can actually work. And we need it soon. And this can only mean a strategic leap.

A Strategic Leap?

The big questions, as we see them: Will Europe, economically fragile and geopolitically insecure, insist that its “financial” hands are tied, and that, absent the U.S., it cannot even begin to pay the true cost of carbon? Will Southern negotiators, divided, beset, and forced yet again to the weary realism of the weak, insist that they cannot hope to change the rules of the game? Or will the European and Southern elites join together to strengthen the “climate protection coalition” that they founded in Bonn back in the ancient days of pre-9/11, when they saved Kyoto from G.W. Bush's repudiation? Will they, even in the face of global economic stagnation, endless war, and a collapsing Atlantic Alliance, be able to find a way across a seemingly impossible divide?

It's going to be harder this time, because this time, the South too is going to have to accept emission reduction commitments. And as inescapably as day follows night, the North is going to have to pay for them.

But why would this be possible?

Perhaps it's not. But, perhaps, and just because the danger is now so clear, it may finally be time to look forward. This time, economic stagnation, institutional delegitimation, social

division, idiot violence, and of course climate change all come wrapped in one dark package. This time, with oil dependence catalyzing if not actually causing global war, the need for a crash renewables transition as part of global New Deal is becoming obvious. All you need is eyes to see.

We believe, and argue (in *Dead Heat*) that only a global climate regime constructed within a framework of equal emissions rights can make strong action possible. Just now, however, we want to make some more limited claims: That our best chance forward is a strengthened North/South coalition, one built without and even despite the U.S.; that there are policy options available, right now, to cement this coalition; that seizing them will be critical to derailing the Bush administration's drive to the abyss.

Fossil Fuel Warriors

In an earlier essay, we described the human predicament in terms of three possible futures, each with its own “party” of partisans: “the party of the fortress world,” “the party of business as usual” (BAU), and “the party of sustainable development.” This is, if you will, our analysis of class and power, and the lens through which we see the global war of position.

Our argument, in a nutshell, is that the rising urgency of climate change provides an opening for the party of sustainable development (and the Global Justice Movement that is its cutting edge), a chance to create a powerful coalition that splits the party of BAU, isolates the Fortress Warriors, and forces a broader and long-overdue transformation.

And if “everything changed” on 9/11, all this remains quite true. The difference is that now, suddenly, we have history manifest, with all its grim detail.

We have a world in which the “War on Terrorism” has been engineered into a vehicle of right-wing social reconstruction, a weapon against dissent, a defense against scandal, a distraction from geopolitical and ecological reality, a Trojan Horse for the Fortress Warriors and, of course, their cousins in the carbon cartel. Nor must you be particularly cynical to see the Bush administration's turn toward imperial unilateralism as an effort to further shift the balance in favor of militarily defined security, unabashed power, pessimism, and all the possibilities that are invoked by the name “Fortress World.”

And since our method is to state the obvious, allow us a few words about oil.

The war in Iraq, whatever else it may be, is a push to dominate geopolitics by defining them in military terms. But it's also a new chapter in the story of oil, as can be suggested, if not elaborated, simply by noting that Iraq has the second-largest reserves in the world. Thus, the drive to impose a friendly regime in Baghdad—or indeed Iraq's indefinite occupation by a U.S. military government, as is now under active discussion in Washington—can be quite fairly seen as an effort to maintain control over the global oil supply. It's an oversimplification, to be sure, and it leaves us with so much more to say—about the world system, anti-Western terrorism, Saddam, nuclear and biological proliferation—but it's an oversimplification that reveals at least as much as it obscures. In fact, it's ridiculously easy to see the Iraqi war as insurance against oil supply interruptions caused by unrest in Saudi Arabia, and even as a wedge intended to break OPEC and usher in a new phase of low global energy prices, just as oil production peaks, as it will do in the coming two decades.

Two Paths Forward

All of this, of course, is known in the conference halls, as it is in the streets. But, by the logic of realism as we know it, the climate negotiations proceed as if in a parallel world, as if the way forward were marked by circumspection and professional silence. We talk of carbon, not of oil, and of sustainability, not of justice. The obvious is not underscored, for it is undiplomatic to do so, and opens vulnerabilities to the right. Instead, step by step, we are called upon to do what little we can.

As indeed we should. The problem is that the climate negotiations, and our rapidly thinning chances of making it to a soft-landing corridor, are profoundly endangered by the U.S.'s foreign policy. To see why, you must first see that the climate talks now face a choice between two strategic paths.

In the first, the EU continues on as the U.S.'s junior partner; Blair keeps kissing Bush's ring and hopes, in his more deluded moments, to eventually deliver U.S. climate action. The rest of the Europeans talk opposition, but never deliver. Southern delegates are pressured to accept crumbs, and to refrain from pressing demands for compensation, or environmental rights, or adequate support in facing the rising impacts of climate change, or, indeed, anything substantial, since all are impossible in the absence of U.S. action. Europe, after all, is "doing all it can," and everyone (including the NGO realists) are called upon to recognize this, and to help pressure the South for "meaningful participation" as the only plausible lever to seduce the U.S. back to the talks.

In the second, the U.S. withdrawal from the climate negotiations is seized as an opportunity, and the EU and

G77/China move forward to solidify the climate protection coalition. In this path, justice begins by doing justice to the facts. The Bush administration comes to be seen as a member of the OPEC camp, hell-bent on prolonging the age of oil by any means necessary. European and G77 statesmen step forward and, with all the diplomacy at their command, argue that the U.S. will follow only when it must. And far from sacrificing equity and adequacy to the U.S., the Europeans (and the NGOs!) recognize the short-run absence of U.S. participation for what it truly is, an opportunity to bring the developing world into the climate regime on reasonably just terms.

We are, obviously, partisans of this second path, but we recognize that it's not an easy sell. How, after all, can we hope to find an adequate and global treaty down a path that exempts the U.S., the world's largest emitter?

Obviously, we can't.

And, in fact, the goal here is not to exempt the U.S., but to articulate a new realism, one that deserves the name. To that end, we have to face a series of difficult truths:

The situation is extremely grave

The scientists and the weather have both reiterated their warnings recently: Global warming has arrived, and may worsen far faster than we've imagined. Further, the opportunity to make it to a "soft landing" corridor may be fast slipping away—holding to a 450 ppm pathway, which can hardly be considered "safe," will require that we go far beyond the Kyoto targets in the next two decades. And if U.S. emissions continue to grow as the Bush administration has promised, the environmental space left for the rest of the world under a

soft-landing corridor, already minuscule, is going to vanish altogether.

The price of U.S. participation is too high

U.S. negotiators are masters at exploiting the desires of other countries to have them "on board." Again and again, they succeed in watering down matters of life and death, one compromise after another in endless succession, to the point of tragic absurdity. It's old news in the climate negotiations, where the U.S. right wing has set the agenda for years, but this is hardly the end of it. Take, too, the Bush administration's recent maneuvers at the International Criminal Court. Or those at the Conference on Finance for Development held earlier this year in Monterrey, Mexico, where all talk of meaningful changes in the development financing system—reducing trade barriers that discriminate against Southern exports, or introducing an international development tax—were pulled from the final agreement. And to what end? So that George W. Bush could attend.

The South holds the key to a global treaty

Washington-based realists tend to see the U.S. as the pivot of the future. But crucial though U.S. policy may be, it's really the South that holds the key to an adequate climate treaty. As we show in another essay ("The Science of Drawing the Line," available online at http://www.ecoequity.org/ceo/ceo_6_2.htm) we have only twenty years, following business-as-usual projections, before Southern emissions alone break out of the 450 pathway. And the curve of these emissions, rising inexorably in the dog-eat-dog struggle for "development," is unlikely to be swayed by promises and half-measures. The only real

hope is redefining business-as-usual, and the best chance of doing so is with a climate treaty strong and fair enough to drive both rapid technology transition and genuine sustainable development. This is still possible, but only just, and only if the needs and the desires of the South are fundamental to the treaty. It's the South, and not Washington, that holds the key.

The North must pay for the soft landing

The South has the "right to development," but it doesn't have the right to destabilize the atmosphere. The North, to be sure, is responsible for our predicament, but this doesn't mean that developing country emissions can just be allowed to increase. In this we agree with the Kyoto skeptics who claim that without developing country commitments, Kyoto won't in fact protect the climate. But here's the twist: Because of the size and urgency of the problem, and because it arises from Northern overuse of the atmospheric commons, the North must pay for the South's decarbonization. Nothing else is just, and nothing else will work.

It's time to tell the truth

Many Northern climate policy professionals are still hoping to avoid major North to South resource transfers. Even if they acknowledge that the North has accumulated a large "ecological debt" to the South—and some do, at least privately—their brand of realism dictates that resource transfers must be kept off the table at all costs. When it comes time for hope, they resort to optimism about trading, and of course to the traditional faith of Western man: The technological transcendence of social problems. Together, so the story goes,

the two will suffice to bring us to some sort of soft-landing corridor.

Believe this tale, and everything will conspire to reinforce your belief. Even today, with the world economy locking into economic stagnation, and the drive for a global post-fossil energy economy offering the best possible change for a new prosperity, the old realism concludes instead that new initiatives are impossible. They are not, no more so than solar/hydrogen economy itself, but this isn't a truth that we can expect from the politicians. Nor can we wait for them to reawaken as statesmen, and to tell inopportune truths. We have to do it ourselves, and we should begin here: We're taking more than our share of the air, and the least we can do is pay for it.

The EU must lead

Europe, just now, is being called by history. And, indeed, an Iraqi war may help it hear the call. Too soon, still, to expect the EU to stand against the U.S., but if this war goes badly, or if it goes well and poisons the global economy with more cheap oil, European resolve may strengthen.

Cross your fingers, because somebody must face reality, and it's not going to be the U.S., not anytime soon. The conclusion is inescapable: The EU (and perhaps Japan) must step to the plate and agree: (1) that they'll begin to pay their share of the cost of meeting the stringent emissions targets that will be necessary, in both the North and South; (2) that they'll pick up the slack in mitigation and adaptation funding left by the U.S.'s abdication, and (3) that they'll pressure the U.S. to rejoin the climate regime by adopting policies designed to counteract the U.S.'s free-riding-policies like border taxes—and that they

will do this even if it means overriding WTO rules.

The trading system can be used to force the U.S. into the regime

This last point is crucial. At Johannesburg, the U.S. led a hard fight for text indicating that in the event of a conflict, WTO rules would take precedence over global environmental treaties. Together, the EU and G77 successfully resisted this effort, but the battle, clearly, will be fought again. And while most U.S. climate policy realists would like to avoid the fray, actual realism points in just the opposite direction. It will be quite impossible to enforce an adequate climate treaty unless global trade rules are explicitly brought into play, and on the side of the greens. The point demands clarification, and marks the path ahead.

The South is right to be suspicious of the greens

Developing countries have quite rightfully worried that efforts to build environmental and labor standards into WTO rules amount to de facto barriers against their exports and their development. The ample history of Northern hypocrisy on protectionism and subsidies speaks for itself. This, however, is not the end of the tale. It's also true that many Southern governments are, like ours, dominated by self-interested elites, and that they have no particular interest in increasing the strength of their domestic environmental and labor protections. This will have to change, and in the same way that change will come in the North, by splitting the elites.

In the meanwhile, Northern environmentalists had best be careful. We may, some of us, believe that the change must begin in Washington, but we must, all of us, be exceedingly

careful to avoid carrying water for the American right wing. If we are going to demand emission reductions in the South, we must pay for them, and as matters not of “aid,” but of right.

The Tipping Point?

We have few chances to change the terrain in truly decisive ways. The climate negotiations, however, offer one. For if the EU rises to its opportunity, and if the South responds, we really do have a chance to win a good second-generation climate treaty, one in which acknowledgment of the North’s historic responsibility for climate change is parlayed into a just and adequate compromise between the rich and the poor, and, indeed, a desperately needed model for a global new deal.

Much, now, depends on the impacts debate, and on who will pay to help the poor “adapt” to the coming turbulence. And while we ourselves

refuse the newly popular argument that impacts and adaptation, rather than mitigation and allocation, are the pivots of climate equity, we can certainly understand why Southern negotiators are determined to highlight adaptation and to keep discussion of future developing country commitments off the table. Were we in their shoes, we would probably do the same.

But could a visionary climate plan, anchored in an alliance between the EU and the South, shift the field? We believe that it could. We believe that if the environmental movement, North and South, stood together for a just climate regime designed to ensure Southern development (the real thing this time), it would become far more difficult for bad actors, Northern or Southern, to play their usual game of divide and conquer. We believe, in fact, that if climate protection became a drive for genuine sustainable development, then even

self-interested Southern elites would acquire a keen interest in it, and for the most practical of reasons: The alliances it would engender would offer them real and tangible benefits in their areas of greatest concern, areas like trade and investment.

And this could actually break the deadlock.

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