

TRANSCULTURAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS IN THE FIELD OF TENSION BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE, CAPITALISM AND PRIVATIZATION OF VITAL RESOURCES

THIRION FRANÇOIS

Le Mans University, France

Abstract. The following article examines the relationship between climate change, capitalism, and the privatization of vital resources. The author argues that the current capitalist system is unsustainable and that the increasing pressures of climate change are contributing to the emergence of transcultural resistance movements, such as the 'Soulèvements de la terre' movement in France. These movements are characterized by their decentralized and anti-capitalist nature, as well as their focus on the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues. The text further contains analysis dedicated to the evolution of class relations within a globalized economy, highlighting the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a transcultural elite and the potential consequences for social and environmental justice in the world system.

Key words: transculturalism, world-system, anti-capitalism, ecologism, technofeodalism

INTRODUCTION

For several years now, the issue of climate change has been addressed in political discourse by both the left and the right, whether to diminish its impact or to turn it into a political and social guideline. Despite the more or less lofty ambitions displayed by several sides, we can only observe a slowness to take measures and a flagrant lack of effectiveness. Sometimes, this hesitancy has been legally denounced by NGOs and grassroots environmental movements (Online 1). Even more serious is the discrepancy between snow-white political rhetoric at international level and the reality of violent domestic political action by the same speakers (Thirion, 2024a). However, a new culture of resistance is emerging in the face of increasing state repression of environmental activists at national level. Using the example of the French 'Soulèvements de la terre' and their international connections in the context of a global war on water resources, the author of this article proposes to question the political, social and economic limits of climate protection within the framework of a capitalist system and the privatization of

the means of production and natural resources, while considering the emergence of a transcultural basis for a global protest movement. The growing importance of international production networks (Staritz/Reiner/Fischer, 2010) shifts in political power in the global system (Schmalz, 2018), and the aggravation of the global climate crisis (Backhouse and Tittor, 2019) on the one hand, call for a perspective that understands class relations as global relations, whilst on the other hand considering specific class relations within the framework of transculturalism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to the most prominent proponent of the world-system approach Immanuel Wallerstein, the modern globalized economy, as it has developed since the 16th century, must be understood in its global context as a capitalist world economy (Wallerstein, 2019: 1 f.). For Wallerstein, capitalism was the first form of society to create a global division of labor and thus achieve the integration of all regions through a global market (Wallerstein, 2019: 29). The modern world system is divided into zones that are characterized by production and circulation processes typical of the center on the one hand, and peripheral on the other (Wallerstein, 2019: 35). Semi-peripheral states occupy an intermediate position in the world system, by virtue of which they form buffer zones between center and periphery (ibid.; Wallerstein, 2010: 180). The analytical ‘world system point of view’ has far-reaching consequences for the understanding of classes and their complex relations (ibid.: 188 f.), but also for the definition of transculturalism, which can emerge and be observed here in the intersections of different zones.

Wallerstein’s critique of a dominant part of the social sciences is that the question of the unit of study has been wrongly answered. Social actions have traditionally been conceptualized as occurring within the framework of a state, which, in turn, can be analytically broken down into political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. However, it is precisely this conception that can be overcome by the transcultural approach. According to Welsch, it is fundamental to the understanding of culture that it is not something that divides but something that connects. When two different cultures meet, there are always points of contact that can blur the boundaries. However, individual cultures separated from the classical concept of culture do not give rise to a global culture, a uniform world culture, but to individuals and societies that contain transcultural elements (Welsch, 2010). The combination of various vertical and horizontal elements of different origins makes each individual a transcultural being. The decisive factor in our case is the exogenous pressure of a third force on individuals from different cultures, pushing them to exchange and merge in order to resist the pressure. Wallerstein had already taken up Prigogine’s concept of bifurcation, which originated in physical and chemical contexts (cf. Prigogine, 1997), to show that

social systems that follow certain laws over a long period eventually lose their equilibrium and form bifurcation points that pave the way for the emergence of a new, unpredictable system. This reorientation has led to greater consideration of cultural, theoretical and epistemological issues in his work.

GROWTH AS STIMULANT FOR INEQUALITY

Two forms of pressure need to be taken into account in our case. The first is created by environmental changes due to climate change, the second by globalized capitalism, both of which are deeply interconnected. We are living in a period of growing inequality, where individuals and groups are progressively evolving in separate, even hermetic, social universes, where information, facts and the realities they reflect have neither the same meaning nor the same value (Oxfam, 2023). Who, for example, among the 863 million people living in slums, can still give the slightest credence to the importance of the return of growth? This growth has largely been at their expense, while massively degrading their ability to adapt to climate change, for which this same growth is responsible (Lohoff, 2014). According to a study published on 17 April 2024 in the journal *Nature* (Kotz, 2024), average global income will fall by almost a fifth over the next twenty-six years as a result of the climate crisis. This decline is due to rising temperatures, heavier precipitation and more frequent and intense extreme weather events, which are expected to cause \$38 000 billion in damage every year by 2049. This heavy toll – much higher than previous estimates – is already partly irreversible for the global economy, for decades to come.

Moreover, as equity was increasingly equated with a loss of efficiency, and therefore a brake on growth, under the impetus of economists such as Milton Friedman, the result was a growing separation between economics and questions of redistribution (Klein, 2007). Not only has this encouraged the uncontrolled development of social inequalities, but it has turned out that growth itself is a stimulant of inequality, becoming the sole marker of development. As Henry Wallich, an American economist, advisor to President Eisenhower and governor of the Federal Reserve, observed, ‘Growth is a substitute for income equality. As long as there is growth, there is hope, and that makes great differences in income tolerable’ (quoted in Daly, 1974: 150). Yet inequality is a major issue in the fight against climate change, simply because it is destabilizing in the long term and makes large-scale adaptation impossible.

RETHINKING CAPITALISM

This is the reason why Bruno Boidin, for example, suggests not to free ourselves from capitalism, but to change its objectives. He proposes a capitalism compatible with sustainable development and the welfare state (Boidin, 2011), without

really taking into account the fact that democracy and the modern welfare state are the actual product of a fragile balance between capital and the anti-capitalist aspirations of the post-World War II era (Merrien, 2007), themselves largely undermined by neoliberal capitalism. The undeniable failure of the Soviet bloc's productivist systems, which were equally incapable of responding to climatic and social challenges, has, through a pendulum effect, long rendered any criticism of the current economic model inaudible and discredited a socialist alternative to Anglo-American liberal ideology (Kurz, 2005). Moreover, it is hard to imagine that without massive pressure, whether human or natural, it would be possible to achieve far-reaching changes that would lead to a limitation of the means of power of the dominant capitalist classes and an awareness of the stakes of climate change within the dominant classes and the state apparatus. This awareness is slow, and seems all the slower for the fact that the urgency of the situation is not perceived in the same way, depending on the economic vulnerability of the individual.

While the impact of climate change is already being felt, particularly by subsistence farmers (Balasha, 2021), it still remains largely a mind game for those who have the means to mitigate its manifestations, or who have the funds to build gigantic bunkers in New Zealand or Texas (Preston, 2019). The main cause of the coming crisis lies precisely in the fact that the monopolization of the welfare state by financial capitalism has systematically undermined capitalism's exogenous stabilization mechanisms, revealing a systemic destabilization mechanism based precisely on the expansion of predatory capitalist practices. Indeed, capitalist systems cannot reproduce themselves from within, and must continually expand in order to exist. In doing so, they progressively destroy what they need to reproduce themselves. This is what Jean-Baptiste Say had already indirectly formulated in 1803 (Say, 1803: Chapter 1 pp. 1-2; trans. mine) with regard to natural resources:

Among these needs, some are satisfied by the use we make of certain things that nature provides us with free of charge, such as air, water and sunlight. We can call these things natural riches, because nature alone pays for them. As she gives them to EVERYONE, no one is obliged to acquire them at the price of any sacrifice. They therefore have no exchangeable value.

The expansive forces of capitalism draw on many springs in the most diverse fields, but their main preoccupation remains capitalist ownership of the means of production. In a world where the concept of production has gone far beyond industrial production, common goods have become, by analogy, natural resources. Wealth that must be appropriated in order to transform it – into marketable goods – thus enabling the maintenance of growth that has long since gone beyond the simple transformation of natural resources through production.

Meanwhile, the finite nature of natural resources precludes the possibility of continuous, unlimited economic and political expansion (Caminel et al., 2014). In other words, there can be no capitalism, allegedly sustainable or otherwise, that does not involve the ongoing appropriation of resources from a non-capitalist third party, which implies by mirror effect that social and environmental sustainability is only possible if capitalist ownership is challenged as a principle.

SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Sustainability requires an appropriate balance between ecological and social objectives. Substantial equality for all individuals is a sustainability goal of the highest order. At the same time, this means that climate change cannot be fought exclusively by market-based means. If a carbon tax is unavoidable in the future, as demanded, for example, by 'Fridays for Future', it cannot be imposed solely on the weaker classes, as was the case in France (Thirion, 2024a). For even if this tax is linked to one-off compensations that depend on the goodwill of the elites, it is basically neither an ecologically sufficient nor a socially sustainable measure. Switzerland already has a carbon tax and social compensation, yet the Swiss economic model and way of life are not at all sustainable. It is obvious that achieving environmental sustainability goals will mechanically lead to higher prices for natural resources and commodities like food. This is why pleas for ecological austerity or calls for trade unions to moderate wages and incomes are simply counter-productive. In a capitalist context, they would only increase corporate profits, encourage flows into the highly speculative segments of the financial market, reinforce the sense of injustice of a large proportion of wage earners and ultimately drive workers into the arms of a radical right wing that denies the existence of man-made climate change (Rodrik, 2021). This further deteriorates the social context and wastes the time available to make the changes needed to maintain acceptable living conditions on earth.

It is also clear that a society whose goal is sustainability, cannot achieve this simply by reverting to the redistributive policies of the twentieth-century welfare state, built on a model of productivist growth. It was precisely in its struggle against the appropriation of vital natural resources, notably water and sand respectively the world's first and second most exploited resources by volume, that the 'Soulèvements de la terre' made its name. The 'Soulèvements de la terre' are part of a revival of anti-capitalist and environmentalist struggles that began with 'Occupy' (2009), 'Nuit debout' (2016) or even the 'Gilets jaunes' (2019) in France and drawing much inspiration from ideological positioning of Zapatistas, which forms the first angle of transcultural openness. These struggles share three points: they are self-organized forms without official leaders, they resort to occupation to reclaim public places (squares, traffic circles, natural territories), and they are anti-capitalist. In this sense, the 'Soulèvements de la terre' embody a radical

movement. This term is to be understood in its etymological sense, meaning that it relates to the principle of a thing and its root. The ‘Soulèvements de la terre’ struggle is therefore radical, since the movement is focused on the foundations of ecology, in other words, the relationships we maintain with the various entities (humans and all living things) that make up the social world. This radicality is structured around three main elements: federative and decentralized dimensions, the rhetoric of living alliances, and a refined, reflexive approach to strategies of struggle. The use of the term *disarmament* to describe the dismantling of infrastructures, to cite just one lexical example, enables us to think differently about the meaning of an action that some might describe as sabotage. This strategy, inspired by the work of Andreas Malm, lecturer in human geography at Lund University, can also be found in other movements such as ‘Ende Gelände’ in Germany, ‘Youth for Climate’, post-Extinction Rebellion groups like ‘Just Stop Oil’, and the ‘Stop Cop City’ mobilization in Atlanta, USA.

TRANSFER OF STRUGGLE CULTURES WITHIN SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES

The ‘Soulèvements de la terre’ movement does not see itself as an association or a constituted group, but as an anti-capitalist network of local struggles at the crossroads of ecology and social issues. Indeed, although agro-industry, land grabbing, soil artificialisation and transitionless ecology are targeted, ‘Soulèvements de la terre’ consider that ecological and social issues are one and the same, and are interdependent. Thus, ecological struggles must be linked to solutions for improving people’s social conditions, and vice versa. ‘Les Soulèvements de la terre’ brings together several associations: ‘Confédération Paysanne’, ‘Alternatiba’ and ‘ATTAC’, and has been joined by activists from ‘Extinction Rebellion’ and ‘Dernière Rénovation’.

If the official website (Online 1) is to be believed, over 97 000 people have signed up to the declaration, a figure that has risen sharply after the mobilization against water privatization and giant retention basins in Sainte-Soline. Added to this is a desire for decentralization, as ‘Les Soulèvements de la terre’ acts as a network to raise awareness and relay local struggles in France and around the world led by citizens’ collectives. For example, ‘Bassines Non Merci’, a group organized against giant retention basins, ‘La Voie est Libre’ against the A69 Toulouse-Castres freeway project, or the ‘No Tav’ group mobilized against the Lyon-Turin rail project. But when, for example, the ‘Soulèvements de la Terre’ *disarmed* cement manufacturer Lafarge in France, their action led to a support communiqué of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, also known as Rojava, themselves engaged against the Lafarge group accused of financially supporting Daech (Online 2). This decentralization drive has recently taken concrete form with the successful call for the creation of local committees

across France, in particular to prove to the government that it is impossible to dissolve a movement with many offshoots. According to the authors, this call was intended to bring about 'inter-global land uprisings' and has spread beyond France's borders to Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Ukraine, Lebanon, Italy and Switzerland.

The second structuring dimension of the movement is the rhetoric of alliance of living beings, which unfolds through the structuring of the struggle into 'seasons' and slogans such as 'We are not defending nature, it is nature that is defending itself', 'We are the living that are defending itself', 'We are the uprisings of the earth', its variations on the theme of water, and 'What grows back everywhere cannot be dissolved'.

Unusual in social movements, although strongly inspired by the Zapatista movement, this rhetoric is not without links to a school of theoretical thought originating with several anthropologists. Figures such as Philippe Descola (2005), Anna Tsing (2015) and Tim Ingold (2013) have shown how capitalist society has imposed a hierarchical separation between Nature and Culture, placing Culture as superior to Nature, which must be domesticated, mastered and appropriated. The agricultural angle and the question of access to water are struggles with a transnational dimension, as they resonate strongly with the concerns of the peripheries of the world-system.

RECOGNITION OF THE SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERIPHERY

In East Asia, around 28% of workers are employed in the industrial sector, in Latin America just 21% and in sub-Saharan Africa barely 11% (ILO, 2018a). Since the 2000s, Latin America has therefore consistently been slightly below the global average of 23% industrial employment, while East Asia has been above (ibid.). Some East Asian regions have become semi-peripheries thanks to strategic industrial policy, and have partially disrupted their social structure (Schmalz, 2018). In other countries, however, such as India, the industrial workforce (10%) continues to play a clearly secondary role to the population working in agriculture (60%) (Graf, 2019: 103 f.). Russia and Latin America are even again characterized by an increased orientation towards the primary sector (Jaitner, 2015; Jäger and Leubolt, 2011; Svampa, 2015: 155 f.) In other semi-peripheral countries, for some decades there has been a trend towards 'early deindustrialization' (Rodrik, 2015). Their social structure decisively is not evolving in the direction of the emergence of a large industrial workforce, as was the case in the central industrialized countries at an early stage between the late 19th and the mid-20th century. Even today, the agricultural sector is of vital importance in peripheral regions, and continues to play a leading role in 'low-income' and 'lower-middle-income' countries, accounting for 62.6% and 39.6% of the workforce

respectively (ILO, 2018a). Yet, while the struggles of the peripheries are largely and generally inaudible in the political circles of the areas at the center, they can find an important echo in militant anti-capitalist climate movements, which are in essence engaged in a global and often post-colonial approach. For example, while certain regions of the globe have been affected by a lack of drinking water for decades, with relative indifference of the center, the fact that similar difficulties are now spreading to central areas also highlights the social struggles that accompany them elsewhere. Due to insufficient winter and spring rainfall to infiltrate the soil and recharge stocks, 68% of water tables in France in April 2023 were below their normal level – and often far below – compared with 58% in April 2022. Since 2018 and with the exception of 2021 and 2024, France has experienced droughts every summer. The droughts of 2022 and 2023 were marked by large-scale fires in the Landes region, severely affecting ecosystems and the economy. More than a thousand rural municipalities had to take exceptional measures to supply with water their residents, for example by having to import bottled water by truck or desalinate seawater. Quality, the main concern when it comes to the production of drinking water, which accounts for 21% of net water withdrawals in France, is now increasingly coupled with the issue of quantity. For its part, agriculture, the leading water-consuming sector with 58% of net withdrawals, is caught between a resource that is deteriorating and industrial practices that degrade the resource. As a result, yields have fallen sharply in some agricultural sectors, and forage production from meadows is down 30% on average for the last twenty years. While considering the lack of water in summer, simultaneously, the overflow should be kept in mind. The intensification of heavy precipitation events, as experienced in 2024, linked to global warming, exacerbates flooding, and therefore the costs of crisis management and prevention. Flooding is all the more brutal in that urbanization, soil artificialization, river straightening and agricultural practices are hampering rainwater infiltration and, consequently, groundwater recharge. Added to this climatic pressure is the impact exerted by large corporations seeking to privatize a resource that is under considerable strain.

MUTATION OF THE WORLD SYSTEM

To follow the transcultural development of transnational ecological and social struggles (Thirion, 2025b), one must take into account the broader evolution of class relations in their transcultural dimension at all levels of the social ladder. In recent decades, ‘elite class’ researchers and social class theorists with a Marxist orientation have increasingly discussed whether a relatively homogeneous ruling class has formed at global level, particularly in view of the emergence of neoliberalism as a new globalized economic-social culture. At the same time, debates on dependency and world system theory have focused on the particular

characteristics of ruling classes in dependent countries. According to Wallerstein (2010: 187), political units in the world system have different political power depending on their specific position in the global division of labor. From Ruy Mauro Marini's point of view, the global centers specialize economically in the production of relative surplus value, which means increasing the exploitation of labor by raising productivity. Capital in the peripheries, on the other hand, concentrates on appropriating raw materials and cheap labour, lengthening the working day and lowering wages – in other words, on increasing absolute surplus value (Marini, 1979). While rising productivity in the centers has led to higher wages, mass consumption and class compromises, the competitive advantages of the peripheries would be characterized by low wages and cheap, unregulated exploitation of nature wherever possible. It would thus be impossible in these countries to build a large domestic market based on mass consumption by wage earners. For Marini, this is one of the reasons why the peripheries can never develop in the same way as the centres. However, with the turning point of the 2000s and Germany's conversion to Thatcherism through the Schröder reforms (Thirion, 2024a), the geographical centres of Wallerstein's theory are sliding towards new, often dematerialized, centres of the super-rich. This is where the transcultural transformation of the super-rich is unprecedented. Individuals holding as many resources as states are in turn becoming their own new centre, semi-independent of the former great national powers. Bernard Arnault's fortune, for example, is worth some 213 billion euro, an accumulated equivalent to the yearly GDP of New Zealand or Portugal. Fernando Cardoso and Enzo Faletto had already discussed a similar hypothesis in the 1970s as the 'internalization of external interests' (Cardoso and Faletto, 1976: 218). In their view, in order to function, the world-system needs an indigenous ruling class with a political interest in imposing its economic function on the world-system (ibid.: 38 f.). On the basis of similar considerations, Nikos Poulantzas distinguishes firstly between a 'comprador bourgeoisie', 'whose interests are entirely subservient to those of foreign capital', whose main aim is to plunder the country's resources, and who are active above all in trade and finance; secondly, a 'domestic bourgeoisie', active in the industrial field and directly dependent on foreign capital, but which has a certain interest in the country's development and the creation of a domestic market, and therefore finds itself in a contradictory relationship with foreign interests; and thirdly, a 'national bourgeoisie' which is 'autonomous in relation to foreign capital' and which 'takes sides with true national independence' (Poulantzas, 1977: 38).

However, with the unprecedented concentration of capital that has been taking place since the 2010s, one can observe a downgrading of this national bourgeoisie in favor of the comprador bourgeoisie and the new extra-territorial fringe of the new center of the super-rich. For Yanis Varoufakis, this new economic and social structure is the expression of the advent of a post-capitalist

world-system, which he defines as ‘technofeudalism’ (Varoufakis, 2024). Within the framework of colonial continuities, transnational corporations, national family conglomerates and state authorities appear as a relatively homogeneous international-national community of interests vis-à-vis the subaltern classes. The relative fusion of political and economic domination, on the one hand, produces a unification of interests in subaltern positions, induced by both socio-economic and political factors, on the other. This trend goes hand in hand with a worldwide wave of ‘autocratization’ (Lührmann, 2019), which means nothing less than abandoning the political and social progress of the last three centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of a transcultural ecological struggle is in reality no more than a mirror adaptation to a shift in class relations and a reorganization of the world-system. Some authors, such as French engineer Jean-Marc Jancovici (2015), believe that democracy is intrinsically incapable of finding viable solutions to climate problems, even going so far as to defend an autocratic oligarchy such as the Chinese model (Kempf, 2021). On the contrary, it turns out that the most active and productive movements for finding solutions or redefining the social pact come from popular opposition (Fridays for future, Extinction Rebellion, L’Affaire du siècle, etc.).

From an environmental point of view, reports such as those of the IPCC have shown that the economy and production models need to be reoriented towards sustainable, resource-efficient goods and services geared to social needs. Given their vital consequences, decisions about the what, how and why of producing goods and services cannot be reserved for small, weakened ruling political elites or large corporations and consultancies, at the risk of seeing societies slide one after another towards far-right neo-populism. Social and ecological sustainability needs economic democracy to make the idea of a balanced sharing of available resources acceptable. It must involve all relevant social groups in production decisions, otherwise any attempt at far-reaching reform will succumb to existing or emerging class interests and relations of domination. As in classical concepts, the radical democratization of economic decision-making power aims to overcome the property principle (Piketty, 2019). This is why it seems vital to understand the new relations of class, struggle and domination from the perspective of transculturality, as this should ultimately enable a finer analysis of the evolution of the new world-system of the 21st century and the issues at stake.

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François Thirion (Dr. Phil., History of Ideas and Sociology) is currently working at the University of Le Mans 3L-AM laboratory. His research interests include class struggle, world-system theory, radical philosophy and environmentalism.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8109-9345>

Email: francois.thirion@univ-lemans.fr