

## **Towards ecological and social justice in the North and in the South.**

### **Italian CNS as a journal and a movement.**

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## **I – The framework**

### **1. Globalisation and its false promises**

One of the driving forces behind neo-liberal globalisation has been the promise to unify the world under the banner of development for all the peoples on Earth, North and South. At the turn of the century, after twenty or thirty years of neo-liberalism, all the economic, social and ecological indicators show that the situation has deteriorated: income distribution is more uneven than ever before, unemployment and poverty are on the rise everywhere and the environmental state of the world is more fragile and at risk, to say the least.

Neo-liberal globalisation has revealed its real goal, to free capital from all social and environmental obligations and enterprises from any social responsibility. International competition destroys jobs and nature: the positive effects of globalisation – if they exist - accrue to restricted global elites and concentrate in selected regions throughout the world, while the vast majority of the population and countries are marginalized and left behind, outside the market.

### **2. The crisis of representative democracy**

Under the present conditions of neo-liberal globalisation and neo-colonialism (the new North-South divide), capitalism survives by exploitation of natural resources and the use of violence to expropriate resources belonging to the local populations who are the only entitled to preserve them for future generations. Local biodiversity (mainly in the South) and public services (mainly in Europe, where they are most developed) are the last frontier of exploitation by the plunderers of global economy. Public services – from schools to hospitals, the backbone of European identity – and the European social model are now under attack.

The most dramatic consequence is the crisis of politics and “public space”. Representative democracy is reduced to an empty shell as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and transnational corporate bodies have taken upon themselves the economic decisions that fundamentally affect the life of the Planet. Economic decisions including disposal of natural resources are centralized in their hands through the process of globalization. This creates growing insecurity among people and communities - erasing cultural identities, individual and collective liberties and civil and social rights.

When political and economic agendas coincide – as in the USA with Bush and in Italy with Berlusconi – democracy becomes a simulacrum, and politics - in the sense of people’s participation in the governing of public matters - loses ground. In this light, war is not so much the continuation of politics by another name, but it becomes politics itself. Individual freedom and rights, wherever they exist, evanesce. Even more, local people, forced to fight each other for resources and the spaces which they have been deprived of, become the prey and the victims of all sorts of ethnic and religious divisions and of fundamentalism of whatever origin.

### **3. The responsibility of the institutional Left in Italy and Europe**

In Italy and in Europe - as well as elsewhere - the left has not been able so far to cope with the challenges posed by neo-liberalism. The existing left in all its components - political parties, unions and more recently large areas of the so-called civil society – is “sincerely” convinced that all problems can and should be solved by the marketplace in spite of any evidence to the contrary. .

The crisis of the left is far reaching. Even under the leadership of the left the European Union, for example, has endorsed foreign economic competition making it the backbone of the European Constitution. The European Constitution was turned down last Spring by the referendum vote of the French and Dutch people, which has made the matter of foreign economic competition open to reconsideration. However, the European Union has transformed the Eastern European countries, which are the newest members of the Union, into its own version of the South – deregulating labour and disregarding the protection of the environment. Moreover the European Union is in the forefront of privatisation of public services (with the so-called Bolkestein European Directive) well ahead of the World Trade Organization.

## **II – Our experience as a journal and as a movement**

### **4. The beginnings**

Italian CNS (Capitalismo Natura Socialismo) started as a journal in 1991, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The decision –taken at the Unità (the newspaper of PCI, Italian Communist Party) Festival in 1989, by myself and Jim O’Connor, who was there as a guest speaker, was then realized two years later thanks to Valentino Parlato, at the time chief editor of *Manifesto*, a newspaper of the New Left. Manifesto then became the publisher of the Italian journal for a few years.

Italian CNS - in tune with the similar journals started in the same years in the USA, France and Spain - was based on the conviction that the ecological issue (or crisis) is a contradiction that capitalism cannot overcome, since capitalism – in its endless drive to accumulate capital – destroys the natural and social resources necessary to its own reproduction (the ecological, personal and communal conditions of production, according to O’Connor’s second contradiction thesis). It therefore creates the conditions of a permanent conflict both with the dispossessed peoples of the South and with the workers and the growing impoverished population of the North. It is thus incapable to grant present and future generations, unless it reduces the use of natural resources changing radically its mode of production and consumption.

We – the people who edited and published the journal in Italy - were convinced moreover that the ecological crisis would become the most important issue of the Third Millennium and that no solution of this question would be possible outside of “socialism” (the third word of the title of the journal). The end of “real” socialism and the implosion of the Soviet Union on one end, and the capitalistic restructuring and heavy layoffs on the other, opened up for the possibility of a new start of the left in Europe and in Italy.

The journal was a great success among the public, and yet we – the people who edited and published the journal - were naïve to believe that the leaders of the institutional left might change so quickly and radically as to accept the implications deriving from the contradiction between capital and nature, ie a new North-South relationship in the access and use of natural resource and

therefore a new mode of production based on use values more than exchange values. It soon became clear that the new leaders of the left were going further and further to the right. Not only were they not capable to assume the ecological contradiction; but in many ways they “abandoned” even the first contradiction, ie labour exploitation, as they endorsed labour flexibility as well as international competition.

## **5. Theoretical and practical approaches to the ecological issue**

Around the middle of the 1990’s it became absolutely clear that the goal to give a “radical and socialist solution” to the ecological crisis was not around the corner. We had therefore to insist and resist, in order to remain on “on the market” as a vehicle of alternative left culture, against the “pensée unique” held by capital and its institutional supporters

We thus looked around to identify different approaches explaining the ecological components of the crisis of capitalism and drew particularly from the work of scholars such as Georgescu-Roegen (the critique of the limits to growth) and activist intellectuals such as the Giorgio Nebbia (the violence of commodities), Martinez Alier (the ecologism of the poor), Martinez Alier and Ramachandra Guha (class conflicts of the second generation), Vandana Shiva (biopiracy), Wolfgang Sachs (of the Wuppertal Institute), Serge Latouche (antiutilitarianism), Mary Mellor, Ariel Salleh and Maria Mies (ecofeminism).

At the same time we came to realize that there was – and still there is – a great variety of subjects struggling over – and against the degradation of - the production of their material and cultural conditions of life and work. Labour is one of these subjects, but not the only one. Women are another relevant subject, often leading the struggles even if from behind.

At the end of the decade, the international protest organized in Seattle against the World Trade Organization signalled to us that the grassroots struggles we knew in Italy – against the war as well as incinerators, among others - were just one example of a global international phenomenon. And this impression was reinforced by the Porto Alegre meetings, the first of which took place in January 2001.

## **6. Italian CNS as a journal and a movement**

We had been involved with grassroots movements for some time and therefore we were well equipped to support the objects of their struggle as they changed and developed. We were also able to work with them so that they might understand and practise their struggles informed by the contradiction between capital and nature whether they viewed their struggles from the perspective of capital or the conditions of life.

At this point we also became a movement. In Italy, CNS - as a journal, now monographic coming out once a year, and as a movement – is working with other groups seeking alternatives. We share with them basic issues such as the necessity for “direct” democracy – to let the people decide for themselves - as opposed to representative democracy. A second point in common with other movements is the recognition that localism and local economies are very important for developing the sustainable use of resources. A third point is to support “the commons” against privatisation and modernization. A fourth point is the fight against industrialized agriculture and for the ecological conversion of all industries.

What distinguishes our journal and our movement is the central role we attribute to the environment in our analysis of capitalist contradictions and our conviction that the North should stop using a

share of global resources greater than its share of global population. It should therefore restructure its own mode of production and consumption, to make it ecologically and socially “sustainable”. This way the North would greatly contribute to overcome the North-South divide, which is vital for the survival of the planet.

Out of this work, which is ongoing in its development, we have recently published a book on the commons in the North and in the South (*Beni comuni tra passato e futuro*), which is the first issue of the monographic series of our journal. A central theme of the book is that “the struggle for a common future and the future commons” must be grounded in grassroots democracy, or real democracy as opposed to representative democracy.

How to achieve real democracy remains to be worked out. At this point however we cannot imagine that participatory coalition-making won’t lie at the heart of this form of our struggle.