The politics of climate change - Interview with Larry Lohmann

by Re-Public
Sunday, 26 October 2008

Larry Lohmann is a scholar and activist who works with the Corner House, a research and solidarity NGO in the UK that supports democratic and community movements for environmental and social justice. In this interview he untangles for us the political contours shaping and being shaped by the climate change crisis, the contradictions of carbon trading, and the spaces from where we can expect more constructive approaches to emerge.Â

Arlen Dilsizian: One way to begin would be too look at the way your work has explored how the fight against climate change connects with struggles of social justice both in the global south and in industrialized nations. Can you explain to us the links and why do you see such struggles as a playing a key role in mitigating climate change?

Larry Lohmann: Climate change is a social issue like other social issues, and as such will always be connected with concrete, specific struggles over fossil fuel exploitation, pollution, health, agriculture, livelihoods, access to energy and so forth. Surprisingly, I think that hasnâ€™t always been understood. Thereâ€™s this impression that climate change is a radically new issue, â€˜the worst problem humanity has ever facedâ€™, â€˜an issue of hard scienceâ€™, and that itâ€™s completely diff any other issue that we face. However, I donâ€™t think thatâ€™s a good way of looking at it. I think itâ€™s important to look at t climate change issue as a continuation and manifestation of some of the same social forces and social problems that we have been dealing with for centuries. Itâ€™s a question of political power, a question of who wins and who loses in terms of access and rights, and is continuous with a whole range of issues starting with the struggles of peoples in places like Ecuador and Alaska to stop the depredations of oil companies on their lands.

Climate change is also an issue that has a lot to do with the question of who owns the atmosphere, whoâ€™s going to have power over the capacity of the earth to stabilize its own climate, and so forth. These questions have to do with power and politics, so of course they have to involve struggles for democracy at all levels.

AD: Well, building on this, there also seems to be the issue that the way climate change is presented to us is in a very depoliticised context, essentially one of preventing certain greenhouse gases from reaching the atmosphere. Would you say that depoliticising the very idea of climate change has been a strategy for not dealing with some of the more important social issues underlying it?

LL: I donâ€™t know if it is a strategy or not, but the fact is that there are constant pressures to depoliticise the issue, and that happens in several ways. As I mentioned, climate change is often presented to us as a scientific issue of molecules moving here and there. Scientists tell us what to do and then we institute some supposedly technical procedure for governing the molecules. Thatâ€™s obviously one way of depoliticising the issue. There are no people and no power struggles in that equation at all. Who decides what means we are going to use to try and stabilize the climate? Who decides where the carbon molecules go? Such questions are elided.

Another respect in which the whole debate is depoliticised â€“ and here I think maybe your word â€˜strategyâ€™ might be a goo word to use â€“ has to do with the way that the social and political issues that arise out of climate change (who owns the atmosphere and so forth) have been obscured by neoclassical economics jargon. For example, when you look at the reports of the official body of experts that advises the UN climate negotiators, the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC), their whole framework is basically one of natural science plus neoclassical economics. There is no political or historical analysis of where the climate problem came from or what history tells us about what sort of struggle is needed to deal with it. Even when it tries to predict what the effects of certain levels of emissions are going to be in the future, the IPCC tends to rely disproportionately on things like population projections, speculations about GDP growth, and so on. A lot of the â€˜optionsâ€™ that the IPCC presents to the worldâ€™s governments are based on a discourse that has captured and dominated by orthodox economists. Intellectually and politically speaking, this is a serious problem.

AD: We have seen a fair share of public misunderstanding about the very nature of climate change negotiations. The US

failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol has often led to its being interpreted as a serious piece of legislation that threatens big carbon emitters. Yet you have shown that the US was in fact the main architect behind the Kyoto legislation. How can we explain the simultaneous US support and rejection of the Kyoto treaty?

LL: Itâ€™s not too hard. The US was very powerful in the international climate change negotiating arena, and in 1997 at the Kyoto Protocol negotiations the Bill Clinton regime said they would not participate further unless three market mechanisms were introduced and Kyoto was turned into a trade treaty. The justification was that this would provide â€˜flexibilityâ€™ for US industry. So Kyoto was written, largely by the US, as a treaty friendly to big business. Companies like Enron, which as an energy trader was well placed to make profits off carbon trading, were happy about Kyoto and wanted the US to be part of it. Al Gore was the standard-bearer for this business faction at the Kyoto negotiations. The rest of the world went along with the US pressure in hopes that this would ensure the US would stay on board any further climate negotiations.

Then George Bush was elected (or not elected, depending on how you look at it) and decided that, unlike Clinton, he didnâ€™t want any part of Kyoto at all, even a Kyoto defined by market mechanisms. This wasnâ€™t because Bush thought Kyoto was a big threat to US business, but he was concerned about the effects on one particular faction of US business â€“ the more dinosaur-like faction represented by companies like Exxon, who didnâ€™t see the same profit opportunities that Enron did, and were against having any climate treaty. Bush sided with this faction, much to the consternation of his friends at Enron like Kenneth Lay.

Now the pendulum is starting to swing back in the other direction. Various regions in the US are busy setting up carbon markets, and during the next administration the federal government may follow suit and, who knows, may even take part in some post-Kyoto treaty. Businesses including investment banks, hedge funds, commodity speculators, and carbon consultants are looking to make big profits out of this new market.

Thereâ€™s no mystery about any of this unless we are taken in by the idea that the battle to put the Kyoto Protocol into effect was a battle between the big bad US and the more progressive rest of the world. It would be more accurate to say that it was a dispute between two business factions within the US.

AD: Why do you see carbon trading failing even by the standards it sets itself?

Carbon trading was designed as a way to save costs on emissions reductions. It works (when it works at all, which it hasnâ€™t so far) by spreading around the costs of any reduction that the government mandates. The idea is that any emissions cuts should be made where they are cheapest. After all, the justification goes, if we can cut emissions cheaply, we neednâ€™t be so worried about having to make steep cuts.

So carbon trading allows industries like electricity generation or aviation not to have to make immediate cuts if those cuts are very expensive â€“ as they are likely to be, since both these industries are heavily invested in fossil fuel use. Instead, these industries can pay money to have other industries cut emissions â€˜forâ€™ them, so that the overall societal target is met. Or those industries can finance special carbon-saving projects in other countries, if they find that thatâ€™s even cheaper as a way of meeting their obligations.

The first problem with this scheme is that itâ€™s aimed at the wrong goal. Dealing with climate change is a matter, above all, of phasing out fossil fuels in a way that does not cause too much suffering. Most coal, oil and gas remaining underground is just going to have to stay underground. But reducing emissions just any old way is not necessarily by itself going to help with a long-term transition away from fossil fuels. You can reduce emissions in the short term by a small amount without starting any of the structural changes that you are going to need to make in the long term. In fact, you can slow down those structural changes if you spread around your emissions cuts in the right, market-approved way. What makes carbon markets possible is that they abstract from this fact. Carbon trading says that to reduce emissions is to deal with

global warming. But you donâ€™t want to indulge in this kind of abstraction, because it takes you away from the root of the problem.

To fill in the picture a bit more, carbon trading is based on the assumption that it doesnâ€™t matter to the climate who makes the emissions cuts, or how or where they are made. Every emissions cut of say, 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, is the same, whether it is made by an electricity generator or a refrigerant plant. But again, this is false. The cheapest cuts of 1 million tonnes are likely to be those that you can make by doing very little â€“ for example, making basic efficiency improvements you should have made anyway and that may even save you money. These cuts are likely to be the kinds of cuts that make no difference whatever to long-term technological or social development away from fossil fuel use. Yet by making these cheap cuts, you are allowing the industries that are buying the pollution rights to delay the investments that need to be made immediately for the sake of the long-term future. Youâ€™re actually blocking progress away from fossil fuels. Youâ€™re keeping the wheels on the fossil fuel industry.

And once you get this market going, thereâ€™s no way youâ€™re going to remember, or care about, what it was supposed to b for in the first place. Everybodyâ€™s too busy trying to figure out extremely clever new ways of making money. A couple of weeks ago an analyst for Deutsche Bank came out and said that the price of carbon pollution rights in Europe was likely to go up, and that to â€˜cushion against the risk of an excessive price spikeâ€™, industries should be allowed to finance more carbon-saving projects in the global South from which they could buy especially cheap carbon credits so they could continue business as usual. The whole game becomes ensuring a price for carbon that is high enough, but not too high, and to arrange things any way you can so that industry, banks, hedge funds, carbon consultants and so forth are all making money. Whether any of this has anything to do with global warming becomes simply irrelevant.

There are a lot of other problems with carbon markets â€“ for example, the way supposedly â€˜carbon-savingâ€™ projects generating carbon credits in the global South are actually blocking constructive action on climate change there â€“ but this is probably enough for a start. You can find a lot of documentation on the websites associated with the Durban Group for Climate Justice, for example The Corner House or www.carbontradewatch.org

AD: You make the connection that the people at the forefront of the climate change battle (those that are making sure that hydro-carbons stay in the ground) are the ones whose livelihoods are most affected by fossil fuel extraction. Yet in a sense a lot of these struggles are both spatially and politically separated from the bulk of the end users of these resources, Western middle class consumers. Do you see this class of people playing a pivotal role in the debate, would it not be safe to say that so far there has been a lot of apathy on the issue of global warming among the global Northâ€™s middle classes?

LL: I donâ€™t see the middle classes in industrialised nations as playing a leading role in the struggle right away, but thatâ€™s not because of any inborn limitation that they have, but in part, at least, because theyâ€™ve been so extremely disempowered in political debates like this. This is especially the case when you consider what the climate crisis calls for is a restructuring of a lot of aspects of society, including the way we produce and think about energy, the way we organize our transport systems, communities and so forth. There will eventually be more motivation among the middle classes in industrialized societies to discuss the changes that need to take place, but I think that probably the first impetus for building a more unified movement will come from people with a different kind of political power, peoples whose livelihoods are actually more immediately connected with the problems of fossil fuel extraction and use, as well as other problems that require structural change.

But of course, even the middle class in industrialized societies is by no means monolithic. You have, for example, lower middle-class communities who are suffering from pollution and health problems due to fossil fuel use, for whom there is a more immediate basis for understanding the nature of the climate problem. Weâ€™ve seen this in places like California, where the government is planning on building 21 new fossil fuel-fired power plants, all of which, without exception, I believe, are going to be sited in poorer communities of colour. The environmental justice movement there doesnâ€™t want to see these plants built, and they as a result they see carbon trading â€“ which is, of course, the official approach to the global warming problem â€“ as a threat. This is because carbon trading is designed in a way that blocks efforts to work towards a different kind of economy that would not require that those plants be built and instead would put resources into, for example, community employment to retrofit existing houses so that they use less energy, and so forth. You wouldnâ€™t call

the environmental justice movement in California a middle-class movement, but there can be links insofar as issues of pollution and fossil fuel dependence also affect middle-class people. So itâ€™s not a black and white picture.

But at the same time, it is a real problem that the growing concern about the climate problem among the middle classes in the North is mostly found among people who donâ€™t want to ask more structural questions â€“ including traditional environmentalists â€“ and sometimes donâ€™t even want to question fossil fuel dependence. These are people who are worried about global warming but are likely to support technical and market fixes proposed by governments, corporations and neoclassical economists without thinking too much about it. From your average middle-class perspective, these supposed fixes are the â€˜politically correctâ€™ approaches. The middle classes in the North remain pretty isolated from potential allies elsewhere â€“ they donâ€™t usually have to come face to face with people of different backgrounds with views that would challenge their preconceptions about politics. That isolation is a problem that will have to be faced, but the leadership will probably have to come from elsewhere.

AD: There has been a lot of media coverage on the emerging role of China and India as major producers of greenhouse gases. Do you think the role of China and India complicates the picture of a simple North/South divide over the responsibility over climate change?

LL: With respect to historical responsibility, no. The historical reality remains: climate change is basically a problem which has been created by the historically industrialized countries. Recently thereâ€™s been a push to â€˜otherâ€™ the problem, to sa that China and India are largely responsible, or are going to be largely responsible in the future, and that therefore â€˜weâ€™ canâ€™t do anything unless â€˜theyâ€™ do. This is worrisome especially in that this line often comes from people who are happ engage in China-bashing or Malthusian kinds of thinking. â€˜Letâ€™s not talk about history,â€™ the line goes. â€˜Letâ€™s not realities of power, letâ€™s talk about the future of those millions of Chinese and Indians who are going to be demanding cars as their birthright, and who want a high fossil-fuel using lifestyle.â€™ That plays into a whole range of racist and colonialist political discourses.

Itâ€™s also important to look at patterns of fossil fuel use in a global perspective. What exactly is being produced by the coal-burning in China that so many pundits are talking about? A very sizable proportion of it is going to, and will continue going to, producing goods for the industrialized North.

Itâ€™s a complicated issue, and I think it requires a lot of understanding of what the internal situation is in these two countries, and the struggle of the groups within them, because neither of these countries is a monolith. There are a lot of voices within both that are stressing that they need to think carefully about a fossil fuel-dependent path. It is important to make contact with those voices and understand their context, and what they think can or should be done.

One of my Chinese activist friends recently joked that when he talks about global warming with people who say the problem is going to be China and India, he often gets the feeling that they think that carbon molecules must somehow be very different in China from the carbon molecules in Europe, and much more damaging.

AD: There seems to be a belief that the very technological qualities of some of the alternative technologies that are being promoted such as fuel cells, solar and wind power make for a more decentralized model of energy production and distribution. Yet doesnâ€™t the risk of monopolization of these technologies remain a real threat to such alternatives?

LL: Yes. That is another way that the climate debate is often depoliticised. People say, â€˜Oh, well, itâ€™s a question of coming up with technical alternatives, a question of scientific innovationâ€™. But again this is actually a political question. We have the example of oil companies like Shell buying up smaller companies involved in non-carbon or low carbon energy production. While they are stepping up exploration for oil resources they are at the same time attempting to monopolize as much as possible any new energy sources. If you look at the climate problem as basically a problem of keeping fossil fuels in the ground, then this is a very worrisome development. In the past we have seen all sorts of precedents, such as in California, the way light railways in cities like Los Angeles were bought up by automobile companies in the middle of

the last century and shut down, to help the growing automobile economy. This sort of precedent gives you a hint of what you have to look for in the monopolization of any technology. So the answer is not in technology alone. Of course some technologies are inherently friendlier to decentralised approaches than others. DC electricity is slightly more adaptable to local production than AC, which is historically associated with big centralized electricity production. But you are not going to solve all your problems simply by promoting a technology that in theory can be more easily adapted to decentralized use.

Wind power is an interesting example. Wind power has by no means been a positive development for certain local communities in India. Land has been taken over, excluding villagers from common pasturelands, for large wind farms that are not in any way reducing the expansion of the fossil fuel economy. Someone sitting 8000 km away and looking at the decentralization possibilities of wind and how it could in theory be a more ecologically and politically friendly technology might miss some of the political realities of what can happen with a technology like that on the ground.

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