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COMMENTARY ON TRUE DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALISM

# The fallacy of renewables and climate change

Between the fallacious positioning of "they are indispensable" and a complete opposition of the "we should not install any" type, there is a huge gap between rationality and, above all, true democracy.

# Manuel Casal Lodeiro

Laiming that renewable energies are the solution to climate change has become commonplace. However, in the face of the accelerated expansion of their installation, it is worth asking ourselves whether there is a verifiable reality behind this commonplace or whether we are, on the contrary, faced with yet another myth of what has come to be called the decarbonisation of our societies.

Because it is not only our political class that we hear telling us that "we need to install renewable energies", but even more than a few sectors of



Molinos de viento en Muras, Galicia.

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environmentalism assert that we need to "massively and rapidly" install large structures of what they call renewables, but which it would be better to call, to be precise and avoid dangerous self-deception, non-renewable systems of temporary capture of renewable energy flows (NRSRE or simply pseudo-renewables). If we don't do this, says a well-known disseminator, the consequences will be "droughts, fires, extreme weather" that will devastate "our fields and our biodiversity".

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Well, then, the cotton wool test of whether pseudo-renewables really help to combat climate change is whether they reduce emissions. Does building, installing and operating a wind turbine, for example, remove carbon from

If we want to combat climate chaos, we need to capture as much as possible of the gases that have already been emitted above the pre-industrial level. the atmosphere? Does a photovoltaic panel do so? The answer is no, they are not made for that purpose but to generate electricity by capturing energy flows present in nature. In fact, their construction requires the burning of significant amounts of fossil fuels, which contributes to... to worsen climate change! It is precisely a "massive

and record-time" installation of this type of NRSRE, as some are calling for, that would cause an acceleration of emissions and a short-term worsening of climate disruption, as pointed out, among others, by a team of experts in modelling the various paths towards an Energy Transition, the GEEDS group (Group of Energy, Economics and Dynamics of Systems) of the University of Valladolid.

Having ruled out that so-called renewables can contribute to combating climate chaos in this first way, a second question remains to be answered: can they capture carbon from the atmosphere? The answer, once again, is

Carbon sequestration is something that only certain parts of the biosphere (trees, living soil, peat bogs, etc.) obvious: they cannot, as they are not designed to do so. Carbon sequestration is something that only certain parts of the biosphere (trees, living soil, peat bogs, etc.) or, at least in theory, certain devices and systems invented or yet to be invented by humans for that purpose, and which are often referred to in the technical literature and IPCC documents as CCS

(carbon capture and storage) systems, can do. But wind turbines, solar panels, etc., are not CCSs. So they do not help by removing emissions either.

The conclusion is therefore clear: so-called renewable energy installations (in reality, pseudo-renewable, since they require non-renewable materials and energy for their construction and replacement) do not serve to combat the anthropogenic climate change that is driving us to extinction. But then, how can it be explained that sectors of environmentalism, including prestigious scientific disseminators, activists and practically the entire political class in unison agree in defending this fallacy and, consequently, call for policies of massive implementation of wind, photovoltaic and associated systems such as hydrogen or the electric car?

To answer this, we must look at certain assumptions underpinning this position, which, it should be pointed out, have no scientific basis but are rather unproven technical hypotheses, cultural myths or purely ideological positions. The first is the belief that renewable energies replace fossil fuels, the burning of which, as is well known, is the main anthropogenic source of carbon emissions into the atmosphere. According to this hypothesis, the more

Fossil consumption growth continues regardless of the parallel growth of pseudorenewable installations. photovoltaic or wind installations we have, the less GHG we emit because the combustion of oil, fossil gas or coal would be replaced by the energy we now obtain from NRSREs. This, which sounds logical in principle, is not supported by facts that show that every new wind turbine and solar panel will cause a coal plant to close or a petrochemical plant to stop using oil or

a fossil gas fertiliser factory to disappear. In fact, any national or global statistical data can show us that fossil consumption growth continues regardless of the parallel growth of pseudo-renewable installations. For this first hypothesis to become a reality, there would have to be some regulation that would force a reduction in total fossil consumption to a greater extent than the consumption of the same fossils required to install NRSREs, but there is no such regulation. And, if one day there were to be such legislation and a similar reduction, it would be that reduction forced by law that would be combating CC and not the deployment of so-called renewables, which, at

most, we could say that what they help us to maintain the level of available energy or at least part of it, that we lose when we do without fossil fuels.

If we continue digging into the arguments supporting the renewable fallacy, we will see that the supposed substitution is based on another assumption without a solid foundation: that we can electrify all current uses of fossil fuels. But this total electrification is not proven. Indeed, some of the current uses of oil, gas and coal can be modified, through more or less costly industrial and social adaptations, to run on electricity which - the advocates of this path forget to explain - is the only energy format that NRSREs are capable of producing, which is why they are also called IRE (Industrial Renewable Electricity, following Antonio Turiel). But the key issue here is that there are other critical uses of fossil energy for which electricity, however much we generate, would be useless, and even its concentrated storage in the form of hydrogen would be severely limited by physical constraints that we are a long way from overcoming if we ever manage to do so. The production of cement in blast furnaces, air transport or the production of many types of plastics would be some of these uses that are difficult or impossible to electrify.

Another underlying assumption here is that we can (and must) maintain a civilisation like the present one, i.e. one that is eminently industrial, hyper-complex and with very high energy and material consumption levels. So, as we know that we have no choice but to stop burning fossil fuels (for the double reason that they destroy the climate and that they are running out), and that this will mean a loss of primary energy of approximately 80% on a global scale, we are told that we need to install renewables because they take for granted the ideological position that we want to maintain this type of civilisation, together with the unproven hypothesis that we can do so. However, there is every reason to doubt the feasibility of preserving a kind of society that was born with fossil fuels, developed to suit them and has been maintained by their increasing flow year after year for more than a century and a half. Not to mention the questionable desirability of maintaining a capitalist society that has demonstrated its unjust, unhealthy and destructive character based on the increasing exploitation of nature, peoples and human minds and bodies. This means that we can only claim that we need massive photovoltaic, wind energy, etc. installations if we can and want to maintain an industrial and capitalist civilisation of perpetual growth. The only thing that demands and needs more and more energy is capitalism, not human needs, let alone the needs of the biosphere.

And finally, even if we were to accept all of the above assumptions, the fallacy of massive renewables as an inescapable necessity to combat climate change would still fail simply because it considers them truly renewable. But there is not a single photovoltaic panel in the world, not a single wind turbine anywhere, that has been built using only renewably sourced electricity and recycled or renewable materials. Nor are there, nor can we expect them, both because of the accelerating depletion of primary minerals and the prohibitive energy cost of approaching sufficient recycling rates to do anything like this on a mass scale.

Does all this mean that we should totally reject so-called renewable energies? Although this is often an accusation levelled against their critics by some believers in the renewable fallacies we have just described, this is not the case at all. Between the fallacious position of "they are indispensable, and on a massive scale" and complete opposition along the lines of "we must not install any", there is a huge gap between rationality and, above all, true democracy. For it is this, and nothing else, that the movements opposing renewable macro-projects are calling for: democracy and energy sovereignty, i.e. the ability to decide what kind of energy, how much and for what purpose. Furthermore, to be rational, decarbonisation must avoid self-deception and start from a realism that recognises that the only way to combat climate change is to stop emitting GHGs, which means stopping burning oil, gas and coal. And that also recognises the unavoidable implications of completely transforming our model of civilisation: to

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accept a global decline in the availability of energy until we reach the levels that can provide us with genuine renewables (what Luis González Reyes calls R3E, truly renewable and emancipatory energies, a concept that includes the non-electric renewables defended by Turiel); to relocate life and the economy in order to satisfy local needs with local energies and materials; to abandon capitalism as the only paradigm that determines social organisation, to decide democratically what other types of models we want to build in each country; to develop (yes) ecological agriculture on a massive scale, properly planned and adapted to each territory, taking into account the already unavoidable factors of climate chaos, in order to ensure food sovereignty and resilience as the first social objective; to develop a whole new structure of international relations based on justice and compensation to peoples for historical and climate debt; as well as an entire series of measures of profound and rapid social transformation towards post-oil, post-growth and post-capitalist societies, such as those being proposed by movements like Degrowth or ecofeminist Ecosocialism, conscious of the limits of the planet.

Only then, on the basis of this new material and social reality, will we be able to formulate together how many wind turbines, photovoltaic panels, electric cars or hydrogen boats we need to build. But then we will no longer do so under the illusion that we are "fighting climate change", but with a society that will no longer need to grow and will consume much, much less energy, we will be able to decide whether we need such technologies to meet real and concrete community needs or whether they are no longer worth the effort.

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