The Jus Semper Global Alliance

In Pursuit of the People and Planet Paradigm

Sustainable Human Development

April 2024 COMMENTARY ON TRUE DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALISM

The toxicity of the capitalist mode of living

More than ten million people die each year worldwide from air pollution, a figure equivalent to deaths caused by war, terrorism, AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and drugs.

Mateo Aguado

Although over the last half-century, capitalism has achieved unparalleled success in terms of material opulence, there is growing evidence to question its real contribution to people's quality of life, particularly in terms of the more immaterial aspects of well-being, such as social cohesion, personal autonomy, physical and mental health, the good use of time, the enjoyment of rewarding interpersonal relationships, or the availability of safe and healthy natural environments.

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As the 1st Ecosocial Report on Quality of Life in Spain, recently published by FUHEM's Ecosocial Area, has shown, it is far from clear that the mode of living of industrial societies is leading us to a life of greater quality and well-being. When we rigorously analyse all the edges and implications linked to the capitalist proposal, we see how this, in addition to eroding many facets of social life (increasing poverty and inequality, increasing job insecurity, persistent social exclusion), is seriously compromising the ecological and environmental foundations on which every society rests (and on which, ultimately, our own subsistence and well-being depend).

The capitalist mode of living, characterised among other things by being highly consumerist and polluting, is not only deteriorating the Earth's ecosystems and biodiversity at an unprecedented rate but is also inducing profound alterations in many essential processes related to the overall functioning of the planet, such as the chemical composition of the atmosphere, the climate system or the biogeochemical cycles of the elements.

According to a recent report by Ecologistas en Acción, one in six people in Spain breathes air of poor quality that does not meet legal standards. The main source of this pollution comes from burning fossil fuels linked to

motorised traffic, particularly present - as is well known - in the large urban areas of our country, which is precisely where most of the population lives. Moreover, considering the new limit values and targets proposed for 2030 by the European Commission, the population exposed to polluted air in Spain will most likely increase to 37,8 million people by the end of this decade, i.e. 80% of the population. This "invisible killer", as described by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is responsible for 36% of lung cancer deaths, 34% of deaths from stroke and 27% of deaths from heart disease and heart attacks worldwide. All in all, it is estimated that around 10,2 million people die each year in the world as a result of air pollution (a figure equivalent to the sum of deaths caused by wars, terrorism, AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and the consumption of drugs and alcohol). In Spain, this figure is estimated to be at least 25.000 premature deaths per year, fifteen times more than deaths caused by traffic accidents.

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But it is not only through breathing that we suffer the consequences of the capitalist mode of living. Many of its worst impacts on human health come to us through the food we eat every day. A study published earlier this year in Spain detected traces of banned pesticides in the urine of children aged between 7 and 11 in different urban and rural areas of Spain. In some cases, exposure to these toxic and carcinogenic - and endocrine-disrupting - substances continuously affected 60% of the children analysed. As the WHO points out, around 30% of the global burden of disease in childhood is related to environmental factors. The sad reality is that we are placing our food in the hands of large transnational industries dedicated to producing vast quantities of cheap food at the cost of the indiscriminate use of pesticides and newly synthesised fertilisers. These fertilisers are also altering the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles in ecosystems, multiplying the cases of eutrophication in lakes and reservoirs and increasing the extent of what are known as oceanic dead zones. This intensive and technologised use of fertilisers is also accelerating the erosion of fertile soil around the world, a phenomenon often fed by other environmental problems such as climate change or changes in land use. This cocktail of factors means that, in Spain, 37% of the national surface is already at risk of desertification.

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We have spread pollutants around the globe to such an extent that a recent study warned of high levels of PFASs found in soils, rain and surface water worldwide. PFASs, or perfluoroalkyl and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, are a group of some 4.700 artificial chemical compounds that have been used in a wide range of everyday products and objects since the 1940s, such as cookware, food packaging and stain repellents. In recent years, PFASs have been linked to various human health problems, including several types of cancer, learning and behavioural disorders in children, infertility and pregnancy complications, increased cholesterol and immune system problems. The drama is of such magnitude that, as the scientific paper states, rainwater is no longer safe to drink anywhere in the world, as its chemical contamination levels exceed the limit values defined in most national and international directives.

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Another emerging source of pollution to be considered is microplastics, the most worrying of which is undoubtedly found in the world's seas and oceans. In 2018, research led by the Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research (Germany) found up to 12.000 microplastic particles per litre of sea ice in samples collected in five

different regions of the Arctic Ocean. In this direction, a paper published earlier this year, based on more than 11.700 seawater samples, estimated that there must be around 170 trillion microplastic particles floating in the world's oceans - particles that, despite their tiny size, have an estimated combined weight of between 1,1 and 4,9 million tonnes - which the authors dubbed "plastic smog". And unsurprisingly, many of these microplastics have already begun to enter food chains. A study by the University of Plymouth detected the presence of microplastics in the gastrointestinal tract of 36.5% of fish examined in the English Channel, in both pelagic and demersal species. In the same vein, scientists from the University of Ghent have estimated that Europeans who eat seafood with some frequency ingest at least 11,000 plastic particles per year. Meanwhile, research by Incheon National University (South Korea) detected the presence of microplastics in 90% of salt brands analysed worldwide. In Spain, a similar study by the University of Alicante concluded in 2017 that the salts of all the saltworks in our country contain microplastics in different concentrations.

The human health implications of microplastics are still largely unknown. Still, they represent a threat to food security and public health in our societies that must be taken seriously. Furthermore, it is believed that the decomposition of plastics and microplastics, both in marine and terrestrial ecosystems, could be releasing various toxic compounds that would constitute a massive source of additional global pollution. One such compound, commonly used in the manufacture of many plastics and resins, is the well-known bisphenol A (or BPA), a harmful endocrine disruptor capable of causing hormonal imbalances at deficient concentrations, promoting cell proliferation and cancer, as well as promoting alterations in cell development and maturation, damage to genetic material, and metabolic, reproductive, cardiovascular and neuronal dysfunction.

All these sources of insecurity that flow from the capitalist proposal, and to which should be added - of course - those derived from climate change (heat waves, droughts, cyclones, hurricanes, explosive storms, floods, extreme cold episodes, rising sea levels, forest fires, etc.), draw a disturbing scenario of environmental unsustainability under which it becomes increasingly difficult to build and guarantee dignified, healthy and safe lives for all people on the planet. No way of life that undermines the integrity and functioning of ecosystems and hinders people's health and autonomy should ever be called desirable. It is urgent to recognise that the capitalist mode of living is not really contributing to the quality of human life, but rather the opposite, as it fosters a materialistic and consumerist notion of well-being at the root of the current ecological and social crisis.

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❖ **About the author: Mateo Aguado** is a member of FUHEM's Ecosocial team and one of the authors of the 1st Ecosocial Report on Quality of Life in Spain.

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