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# Eco-imperialism at the Bali summit?

By James Heartfield

**Brief historicization (from [www.spiked-online.com](http://www.spiked-online.com)) of the latest inter-governmental eco-policy deal, looking into the way certain branches of capital established the 'Green' agenda long before its discovery by counter-culture and adoption by mainstream moralism. The ideology of Scarcity is perpetual, but it took on this distinct institutional form during the late 20th century Supply Side ascendancy. Incidentally the implicit contradiction between an 'eco-imperialist' drive to keep the 'underdeveloped' world that way (as a 'non-capitalist' source of loot) and industrial capitals' need to draw ever more labour-power into their orbit was explained by Rosa Luxemburg in 1913 in 'The Accumulation of Capital': "The conditions for the capitalization of surplus-value clash increasingly with the conditions for the renewal of the aggregate capital – a conflict which, incidentally, is merely a counterpart of the contradictions implied in the law of a declining profit rate".**

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**After Bali: Are Western powers offsetting their industrial growth by blackmailing poorer countries to foreswear development? One writer thinks so.**

James Heartfield

**More than most scientific questions, the state of the environment has been deeply mixed up with international rivalries. In fact, some nations seem to have politicised environmental claims as a weapon in their economic competition. CO2 emissions mirror industrial output. The agreement in Bali to limit CO2 emissions looks to me like an attempt by the Great Powers to regulate industrial competition.**

British diplomat Sir Crispin Tickell was one of the first people to identify the *realpolitik* possibilities of ecological concern. His book *Climate Change in World Affairs* attempted to justify Western intervention into the internal domestic policies of newly-independent Third World states. Those governments, said Tickell, 'can often make things as bad for their neighbours as for themselves... but they lack the knowledge and still more the means to cope'. *Climate Change in World Affairs* was published in 1977, long before scientists identified global warming as a problem.

In 1988 Sir Crispin persuaded then UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher to make a major speech on global warming as the 'new danger' that would replace the Soviet threat as a motivation for Western policy (1). Finding a new principle around which to organise international diplomacy was pressing in the late Eighties and early Nineties. For 40 years, the leading Western powers had organised themselves, and the rest of the world, around a campaign against communism. But when Russia abandoned Communism, a new motivation had to be found for Western leadership on the world stage.

While most of today's anti-capitalist protesters were still at school, the global elite put climate change on the agenda of the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992, and agreed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at Kyoto in December 1997. Greenhouse gas emissions, which the convention limits, roughly correspond to heavy industrial output, especially at a lower technological level. For that reason, different nations adopted differing stances on Kyoto, according to its differential impact. As a mature region, with declining growth rates, but a high technical level, Europe was pointedly in favour of the measure that set limits on its more dynamic competitors. Developing countries like Russia, India and China were pointedly more sceptical, as was the heavily producing United States.

Indeed, China and India could only be persuaded to sign on the basis that they would not be subject to greenhouse gas limits under the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’. Russia only agreed to sign up in exchange for membership of the World Trade Organisation. But despite negotiating opt-outs, the Kyoto framework makes their growth open to constant attack (2). ‘Developing nations whose emissions are surging are under no pressure to cut back’, worries *The Sunday Times*, reporting that ‘bringing India and China into a new emissions regime is a major part of what the EU and America want to achieve [at the December 2007 climate change talks] at Bali’ (3).

The new climate deal struck at Bali seems to be about letting First World countries offset *their* industrial growth by persuading less developed countries to forego growth, and enlarge their forest reserves instead. In effect the West will use its financial leverage to keep the natives sitting in darkness and its own monopoly on technology intact. Even Tony Juniper of Friends of the Earth was moved to denounce this deal as ‘ecological imperialism foisted on the developing world’ (4).

The debate over Kyoto made it clear that what was at issue was economic rivalry, masked as climate control. During the initial negotiations, then US president Bill Clinton was preoccupied with China and India, because ‘within 30 years they would surpass the United States as emitters of greenhouse gases’ (5). Openly expressed, hostility to Chinese and Indian industrial expansion would sound like self-serving hypocrisy. Dressed up as environmental concern it looked like altruism. When the US Congress balked at reining in US industry and refused to sign Kyoto, it was America’s turn to be attacked. Incoming president George W Bush was widely denounced by European protesters as the ‘Toxic Texan’. At Bali this month, the US negotiators were booed. Climate control seems to make national chauvinism acceptable.

For some radicals it seemed straightforward that the opponents of the Kyoto accord were industry spokesmen, and its defenders critics of big business. But that was to forget that capitalism is a competitive system. Setting limits to output was indeed a successful capitalist strategy, especially for those businesses with a lower carbon footprint, like banks and other financial speculators. Translated to competition at the international level, nations’ interests differ according to the proportion of CO2-emitting industries in their domestic economies. For those nations that are experiencing slower growth, penalising more dynamic competitors made sense. What is more, even for companies with higher emissions, raising the bar of entry could prove to be a successful business strategy. Of course, big greenhouse gas emitters were among the business lobby that opposed Kyoto, and the United States, being home to many of those, was among the most reluctant to sign up to the treaty. Was the Kyoto Convention, then, a blow against business? Hardly. Not unless Enron or the European Union or Al Gore are to be counted among the enemies of big business.

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