

"Climate Disasters: Three Obstacles to Doing Anything"

Scientists have been warning us about the dangers of human-caused transformations of the earth's climate for about fifty years now. But in the last two to three years, there have been two important changes in the situation. First, there have been a series of very authoritative reports by different scientific groups, which assert not merely that these dangers are real but that they are occurring at a pace far faster than scientists believed even five years ago. As Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany said recently, "It's not five minutes to midnight; it's five minutes after midnight."

The second change is the degree to which these changes have become visible to ordinary people. There has been the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. There has been the increase in the frequency and ferocity of hurricanes in the Caribbean, culminating in the notable disaster of Katrina. Pictures of the break-up of ice zones in the Arctic have been widespread in the press. And this year, the meteorologists in London who have been measuring temperatures for over three centuries announced that this was London's warmest winter since they have been measuring. The counterpart of the warm weather in Europe has been the tornados and other wind-driven disasters elsewhere.

So, why is so little being done? It is clearly not for lack of awareness of the problem, however much some persons try to deny its existence. Yet, the degree to which the political leaders of the world are ready to do something about it, and indeed the degree to which there is public pressure that they do something, is remarkably low. When there is such a clear disjunction between knowledge and action, there must be obstacles in the socio-political arena to explain this. In fact, there are three quite powerful obstacles to action: the interests of producers/entrepreneurs, the interests of less wealthy nations, and the attitudes of you and me. Each is a powerful obstacle.

Producers/entrepreneurs are concerned first of all with the profitability of their activity. If one asks them to internalize costs that they presently do not have to pay (the amelioration or clean-up of their polluting processes), this affects seriously their profits in two ways. First, it forces them to raise their prices, and they may find that this eliminates certain customers. And if they internalize their costs but their competitors do not, then they can lose sales to their competitors.

This is why, as a general rule, voluntary actions are unlikely to work, since voluntary actions are rarely unanimous. In this case, the virtuous producer/entrepreneur will lose out to competitors. The solution to this is government-mandated compulsory internalization of costs. Even if this solves the *national* competitor problem, it still leaves open the loss to *international* competitors as well as the fact that, over a certain price, there is a decline in customers.

The second problem is precisely that of international competition. Countries that are poorer seek to improve their ability to compete in the world market. One of the ways in which they do this is by producing given products at a lower cost level and hence items that can be marketed at a lower price level. If one mandates (say through an international treaty) certain shifts in the process of production (say, the reduction of the use of coal for energy), this requires expensive restructuring of the industries of these countries as well as the potential loss of their competitive price advantage. This is the argument currently of such very large

countries as China and India, but also of East/Central European countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic.

There is of course a partial solution to this problem. It is a massive funding of the costs of restructuring of the industries of these countries by the presently wealthy countries (the United States, western Europe). But such transfers of wealth - for this is what it is - have always been unpopular, and have little political support within these wealthier countries. In any case, this doesn't affect the potential loss of price advantage, so important to these less wealthy countries.

You and I constitute the heart of the third obstacle. It is called consumerism. People have always liked to consume. But in the last fifty years, the number of people who could consume beyond a certain minimum level for survival has increased notably. If one calls upon individuals to consume less electricity or less power, or consume fewer of the products that require these inputs, one is calling on individuals who are presently consumers to change their style of life, often in significant ways. And for those who are presently not wealthy enough to engage in such consumption, one is calling upon them to renounce powerful aspirations to have access to the consumption they have been historically denied.

This too can be solved. People can reeducate each other. People can bring to the forefront of their value-system other things than more consumption. We can all accept the necessity to achieve more equal living standards across the globe, even if for some it may mean lowering their own advantages.

Fifty years ago, scientists first produced the evidence that consuming tobacco products had the consequence of an increased cancer rate. Doing something about it met all the same obstacles which doing something about climate dangers presents today. After fifty years, worldwide, the rate of smoking has gone down considerably, in part because of forcing tobacco companies through legal suits to reimburse the social costs of their previous actions, in part because of reeducated individuals, and in part because of government-mandated restrictions on locales in which one is permitted to smoke. So, something can be done, it is clear.

But do we have fifty years?

by Immanuel Wallerstein