

CANCUN, AND MORE CONSEQUENTIAL C WORDS¹

Michael M'Gonigle and Louise Takeda[©]

There seems to be something about the letter C and climate change. Last year, it was Copenhagen. This week, it's Cancun. And in between it was Cochabamba. And it's not just the venues, but the outcomes. Copenhagen was all about political confrontation and the collapse of hope. This year we must wrest the conversation from the constrained voices of timid governments and change the terms of discussion. Doing so is vital to our very survival. Here is how that can be done.

Copenhagen

As everyone remembers, last December's climate conference failed to arrive at a binding agreement for atmospheric reductions of carbon emissions. It didn't come close to considering commitments at a level and pace of reduction that might hold global temperature increases within a range that wouldn't "cook the earth" (as Bolivian President Evo Morales put it). To the demonstrators barricaded outside the negotiations, and delegates from the developing world excluded inside the negotiations, the conference was a catastrophe. The hastily stitched together Copenhagen Accord was an exercise in PR and power politics. But it secured the real goal of the big players, the U.S. and China, to avoid the menace of a really big C: commitment.

Cancun

Now there is another go at it, a conference of the parties to the Kyoto Protocol (COP16) starting this Monday and running for two weeks. Delegates from 194 countries and associated activists and newsies, expected to total around 15,000, will burn tons of jet fuel to join the gathering at the Cancun Messe and Moon Palace Hotel. (With that name, the latter is particularly apt for such a get together. As the old joke goes about a restaurant on the moon -- great food, no atmosphere.)

Unfortunately, there's not much hope for the atmosphere, nor for palatable progress, at Cancun. Not wanting to risk the embarrassment of disappointing outcomes again, the meeting has been massively downplayed. World leaders are staying home, leaving the trip to their ministers. With Obama unable to move any legislation through a Republican-dominated Congress, and a China in hyper-drive, the two biggest emitters aren't proposing anything new. Even the EU's comparatively tough stance -- a promise to cut emissions by at least 20 per cent of 1990 levels by 2020 -- falls far short of the 45 per cent minimum cut, which the latest science says is needed by 2020 to hold down the planet's rising fever.

The main sticking points are, of course, the economic burdens that such an agreement would impose, and who should pay for them. For the global South, it's the North's fault. They got rich at the earth's expense; now they have to pay for healing it. For the rich North, it's a global problem, and everyone should take the hit -- including rapidly growing southern economies like China, India and Brazil. Rather than cutting their emissions, the industrialized nations talk mostly about turning the exercise into a new investment game of earning carbon 'credits' through dodgy "green" projects in the South.

¹ The Tyee, November 29, 2010

Cochabamba

Never heard of it? Well, that's no surprise, even though it was probably the largest meeting of the bunch, with 30,000 participants descending on the capital of Bolivia at the invitation of the country's radical President Evo Morales. This was not a UN meeting, but a "World's People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth" held last May in response to the failure of Copenhagen. With a conference title like that, you can guess how few world leaders or cabinet ministers turned up. But lots of real people came. This was a reflection of the main difference between the two conferences. Copenhagen was about the effects of climate change; Cochabamba was about the causes. As the placards floating above the sea of demonstrators in Copenhagen had demanded: "System change not climate change."

And Cochabamba didn't mince words, demanding a serious global dialogue about, and action on, the main cause of climate change (another big C word): capitalism. Oops -- now there's a conversation stopper, even at the best of times. With the world focused on rescuing capitalism from its own unstoppable excesses, no one wants to talk about the global economy's self-destructive contradictions. Except the delegates at Cochabamba. "The capitalist system," they stated in their *People's Agreement*, has imposed on us a logic of competition, progress and limitless growth. This regime of production and consumption seeks profit without limits, separating human beings from nature, and imposing a logic of domination upon nature, transforming everything into commodities... "Under capitalism, Mother Earth is converted into a source of raw materials, and human beings into consumers and a means of production, into people that are seen as valuable only for what they own, and not for what they are."

Eschewing capitalist values, the Cochamba Agreement drew on the indigenous concept of "Buen Vivir" or "living well." In contrast to Western notions of progress, it stresses the satisfaction of needs rather than luxury, community health rather than private accumulation, and harmonious relations with our surroundings rather than development and modernization.

The Cochabamba Agreement was loaded with specific proposals: an international climate tribunal to prosecute those that pollute and provoke climate change, full recognition of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, amendment of the Kyoto Protocol to require developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to 50 per cent of 1990 levels by 2020, and rejection of "false market solutions" such as carbon trading and *offset mechanisms* that allow industrialized countries to keep polluting while investing in environmentally and socially-damaging projects in the South.

Cochamba spoke to new, more diverse, and more localized economies as well as the need for a profound shift to sustainable models of agriculture. And the potential in just this one sector is arguably huge. *Research* suggests that a global shift to organic agriculture on the earth's 3.5 billion acres of tillable land could reduce current carbon emissions by nearly 40 per cent. At the insistence of southern countries like Bolivia and Venezuela, many of these proposals actually made it into the massive working text in Cancun. But good luck trying to get them past the lobbyists from agribusiness, multinational forestry, global finance...

Collision

Ecuador, Bolivia and many other small countries vocally opposed the injustices of the Copenhagen Accord. In reaction, the great orator of social Change and political Can-do, President Barack Obama, promptly cut aid funds that had previously been allocated to those countries. Morales responded to his country's loss of \$2.5 million by offering Obama \$2.5

million if the U.S. would sign the 20-year-old Kyoto Accord. With such bitter divisions, we can't expect much from Cancun. A *leaked memo* from the White House revealed that the U.S. won't drop the political protection of the Copenhagen Accord. Even the Copenhagen commitment to provide \$30 billion in adaptation funding to poor countries between 2010-12 isn't being met. Only 10 per cent has been expended so far, much of this on boondoggles that the developed countries unilaterally *decided* were investment worthy.

As to the effectiveness of voluntary commitments, the European Commission reported in June that voluntary commitments represented a real reduction of carbon emissions of just two per cent based on 1990 levels. And these don't even include the embedded emissions from all the stuff imported from China and other places. Meanwhile, it's been reported that greenhouse gas emissions actually dropped for 2008-09, the year of the "great recession." (Hmm... is there possibly a link here?) But, thankfully, growth and emissions are now back up, the latter expected to reach record levels for 2010. What a relief!

The stage is set for a collision between evidence and ideology, between social justice and economic power, between planetary opportunity and state intransigence. As American cultural theorist Frederic Jameson remarked, it is easier to envision the end of the planet than the end of capitalism. We are suffering from a deadly lack of imagination.

Most obvious is the obsession with "market mechanisms" that try to price all aspects of nature. High on the priority list is REDD -- Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. This program may sound good but has been widely condemned as ineffective while encouraging land grabs. Then there are the carbon offsets that keep wealthy fliers guilt-free for \$15 a trip, carbon trading schemes that return big profits to Wall Street, and carbon taxes set at politically beneficial, but environmentally meaningless, levels. One of the worst examples is the UN's Clean Development Mechanism which invests offset dollars in such 'green' endeavours as a massive hydro-electric dam complex that will convert one of the world's last great ecosystems, the Mekong, into an 'organic machine.' As Fritz Schumacher, a pioneer of ecological economics and author of *Small is Beautiful*, lamented, we tinker endlessly *inside* the operating system of planetary destruction, but we don't even know how to talk about getting outside of it.

Another C: Columbia

As in British Columbia, or even the District of Columbia. In the South, they are talking about getting outside the old economy, from Cochabamba to Cartagena. But in the North, it's silence and whispers. That has to change, here and in every northern capital, like Washington D.C. Climate change is not only a physical or even an economic challenge, but a challenge to a democracy that is increasingly notable for what it can't do than what it can.

Consider the constricted discourse that prevents any real discussion on the trap of (shhh... capitalist) dependence on growth and commodification. A few brave souls tip-toe around the word with more palatable terms like 'de-growth'. However expressed, the reality is that there is no hope of escape from our planetary momentum without a whole bunch of folks willing to confront the evidence, and the power of denial, and admit that the emperor has no clothes. In fact, the whole imperial court is due for a refitting. And it will demand smart tailoring as we are all part of that court. It's not hard to see. Want a nice retirement? Then you expect nice returns on the capital invested in your pension funds. That's growth, and it has to come from somewhere.

Our democratic deficit is most damaging in the timid monopoly of 'liberal' discourse. Protecting itself behind the false premise of a more responsive operating system, this discourse legitimizes as reformable an economic growth machine that knows no reforming; in so doing, it inherently delegitimizes those who do speak to the evidence, and the alternatives. In trying to get some control of over this machine, the South needs allies in the North who can change the conversation from this side.

One of the most powerful movements at Cancun is the peasant-based Via Campesina. Its alternative conference at Cancun, The Global Forum for Life and Environmental and Social Justice, will focus on small-scale and diverse solutions in contrast to the unremitting march of carbon-emitting, neoliberal globalization. As you read this, a farmers' march is converging on Cancun. But what they also want, now and in the days and months ahead, is for "thousands of Cancuns" the world over to explain the false solutions that dominate acceptable discourse in the North, and promote "thousands of people's solutions to climate change."

And this call is being taken up. In Vancouver, a *mass direct action* is planned at the Waterfront Skytrain Station to protest the forces that cling to profits from the fossil fuel economy and support the building of freeways instead of public transit. The voices of Cochabamba and the South need to be heard and articulated here, in B.C. and D.C. But what that conversation will really demand is the most important C word of all.

Courage.