AFTER THE FAILURE OF THE GREEN ECONOMY

10 THESES OF A CRITIQUE OF THE GREEN ECONOMY

WORKING GROUP 'SOCIETAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE' (GESNAT) OF THE FEDERAL COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONALISMUS (BUNDESKOORDINATION INTERNATIONALISMUS – BUKO)

It used to be called sustainability, but today it is the 'Green Economy'. Sustainability was the promise for the ecological modernisation of crisis-laden capitalism together with few – or plenty – social elements. And this is what the *Green Economy is* about. In the following 10 theses we will show why the *Green Economy* will have to fail in meeting its claim of greening the economy, which is due to the prevailing capitalist and imperialist conditions as well as the unquestioned faith in progress. Strategies of the *Green Economy* will not be able to outweigh the social and ecological contradictions of capitalism, at best the strategies are able to revise these contradictions. Put differently: capitalist modes of production never operate according to the reproductive needs of humans and nature, who in fact pose limits to the process of production. A *Green Economy* will only be able to reposition these limits. We therefore argue that dealing with the current crises in an emancipatory, internationalist and solidarity-based manner has to involve a change in the given economic structures and prevailing power relations. We understand this shortened version of our theses as a contribution to discussions about and searches for an emancipatory and socio-ecological transformation of the global modes of productions and ways of life.

Similar to the concept of sustainability, the advocates of a *Green Economy* promise the reconciliation of economics, ecology and society. Accordingly, the Environmental Program of the United Nations (UNEP) headlines its programmatic 2011 report for the Rio+20 conference as 'Towards a green economy. Pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication'. Yet the current debate about a *Green Economy* differs from the discussion and strategies around sustainable development in the early 1990s. Firstly, today the technological base of a *Green Economy* is much more developed. Secondly, in the capitalist centres the *Green Economy* is hailed as a solution to the deep-rooted (economic and financial) crises. The *Green Economy* appears most palatable precisely due to the 'constructive force of the crisis'.

As usual with such debates, the forces responsible for the crisis are identified as the beacon of hope: states and especially markets and capital, as well as the orientation towards growth and competitiveness. With the aid of the *Green Economy* the driving forces for social and ecological disastrous capitalism are not called into question; on the contrary, they are to be used for a green conversion.

Critique of the Green Economy

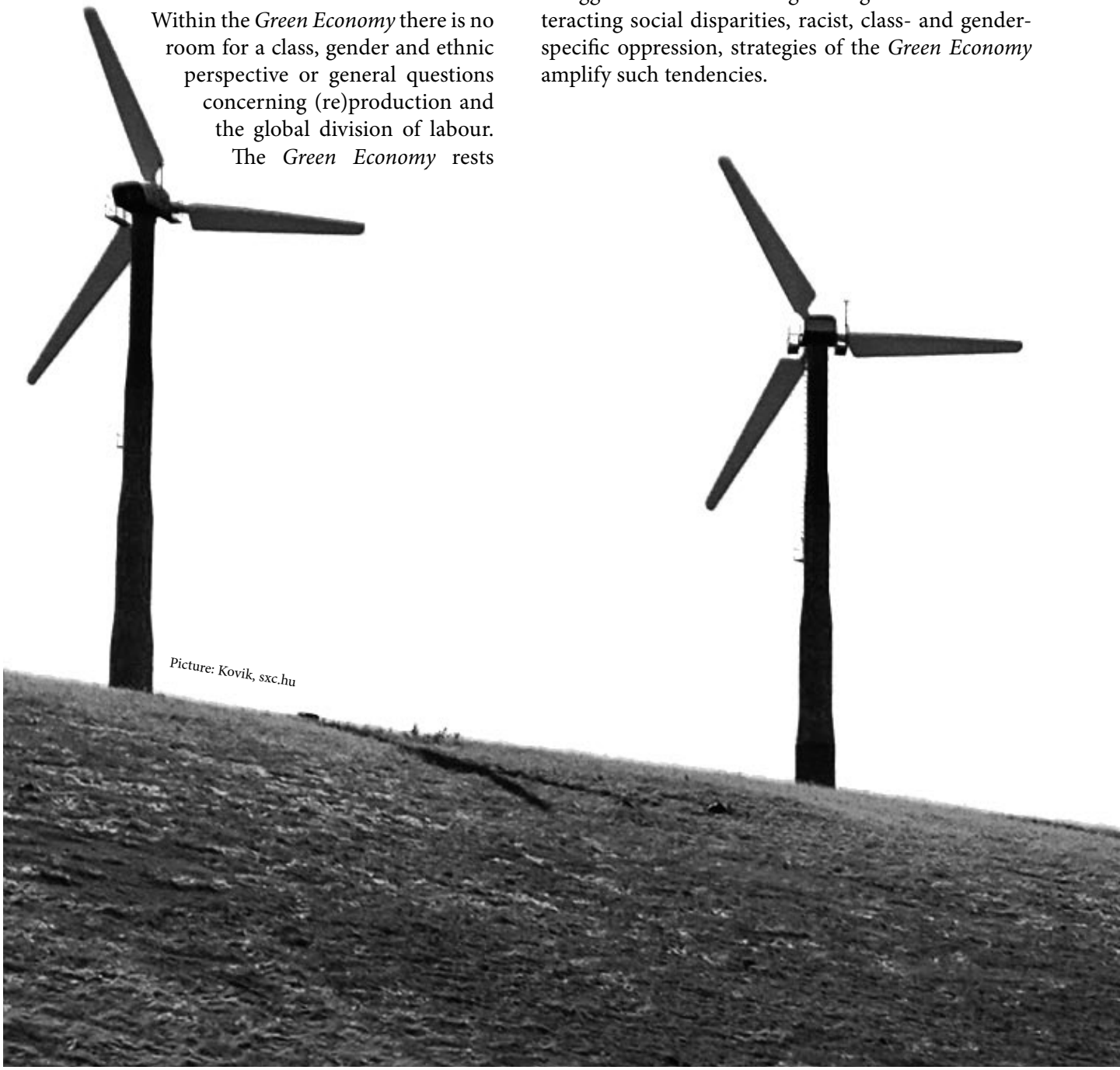
THESIS 1: The strict decoupling of economic growth and environmental destruction is not possible under capitalism.

Different concepts of a *Green Economy*, understood as strategies for a new economic paradigm, share the view that a decoupling of capitalist economic growth and environmental destruction are possible through technological and social innovations. That is an appealing promise. Yet the limits to such a perspective become visible on empirical grounds. The so called rebound effect points to the most likely scenario that possible savings through energy efficiency will be nullified or even over-compensat-

ed through growing demand based on increases in productivity and the subsequent lowered costs. The formula 'efficiency=austerity=less environmental destruction' does not work out: increases in efficiency and productivity are driving economic growth, which translates into an increase in production, energy and resource use. We need an understanding of social and individual wealth, which does not equal wealth with economic growth.

THESIS 2: The Green Economy is masking exploitation and power relations. The social dimension is reduced to a question of growth, green jobs and poverty reduction.

Within the *Green Economy* there is no room for a class, gender and ethnic perspective or general questions concerning (re)production and the global division of labour. The *Green Economy* rests on a fallacious assumption when reducing the social question to a generation of so called green jobs – this will not produce social justice. The first command of capitalist production is maximising profits by increasing production of goods and services. Products, even so called 'green' ones require natural resources like rare-earths or agricultural goods – most visible in the case of agrofuels. These resources come from mines or plantations in the Global South. Most often the social conditions are catastrophic. Mining under the rule of international corporations leads to countless evictions and massive environmental degradation. By cultivating commodities for agrofuels the local food production has to give way to the mobility needs of the global middle and upper class. Simultaneously, (trans)national corporations with sufficient capital push, in accordance with national political elites, for an aggressive form of land grabbing. Instead of counteracting social disparities, racist, class- and gender-specific oppression, strategies of the *Green Economy* amplify such tendencies.



Picture: Kovik, sxc.hu

THESIS 3: Strategies of a Green Economy are based on technological approaches.

Strategies of a *Green Economy* follow a green-technolocical timetable. Similar to the models of ecological modernisation in the 1980s technological innovations and know-how provide the path to future development. The magic word is 'resource efficiency'.

There is nothing to be said against the development of renewable energies or a reduction of resource use. Yet is is crucial to ask *how* this should be achieved and *whose* interest is served. The *Green Economy* is based on power-confirming technologies, which affirm centralised, corporate forms of energy production and supply. Already in place are gigantic off-shore wind farms, the solar energy initiative 'Desertec', electric fleets of car or the planned Belo Monte dam in the North of Brazil, which are expressions of techno-fixes, controlled by political elites, affirming existing power relations.

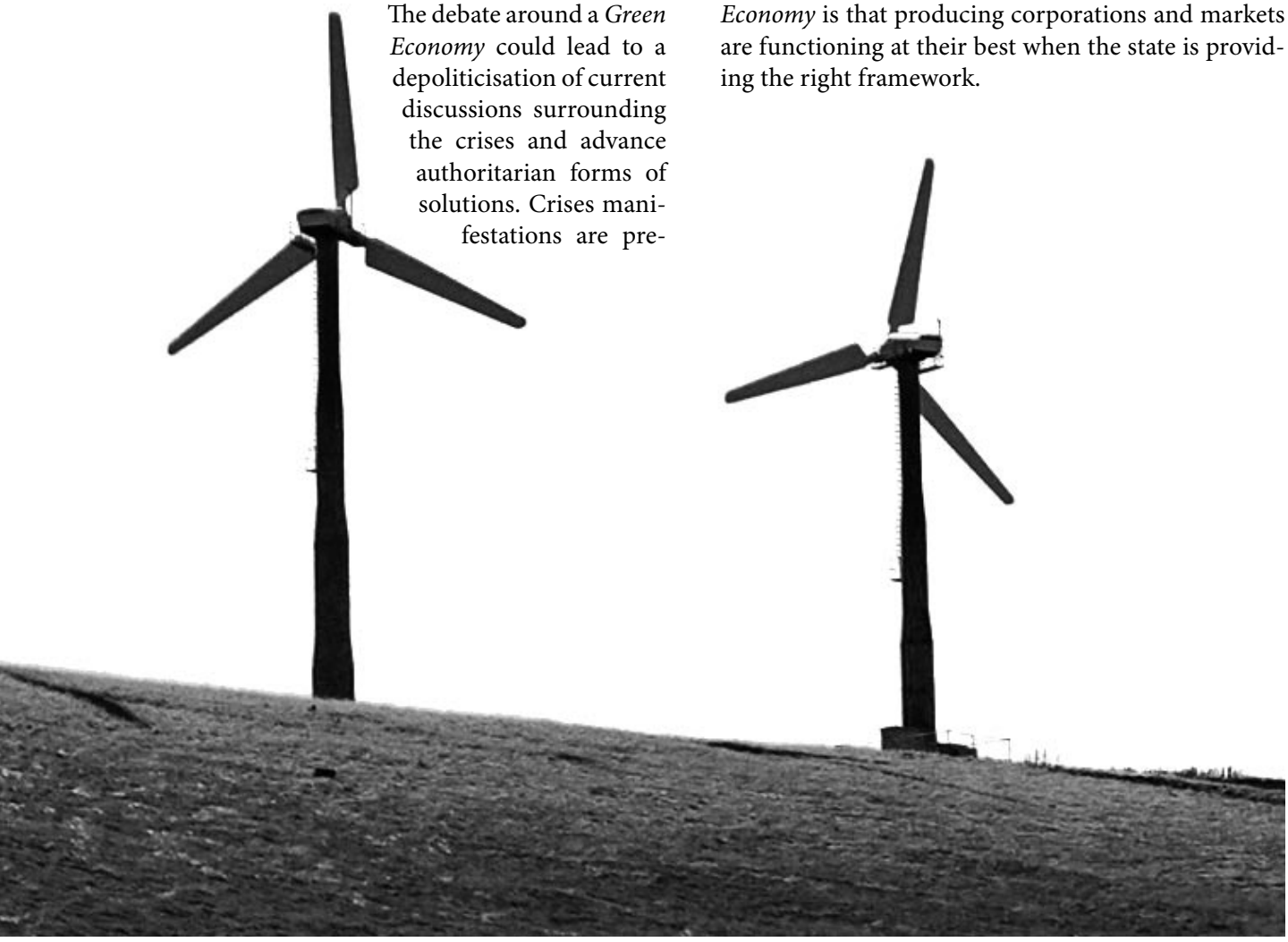
THESIS 4: The Green Economy is depoliticising the debate around a socio-ecological transformation.

The debate around a *Green Economy* could lead to a depoliticisation of current discussions surrounding the crises and advance authoritarian forms of solutions. Crises manifestations are presented as an *outside* threat to society or the whole of humanity and can only be brought under control by seemingly objective and neutral expert's knowledge and decisions based on such expertise. Existing social contradictions and conflicts are rendered invisible by the faith in the virtue of management and governance approaches and the apparent TINA factor (There Is No Alternative).

Green Economy and green capitalism

THESIS 5: The Green Economy is pushing the commodification of nature under the guise of its protection.

The Capitalist dynamic is based on turning nature's elements like water, biological diversity, gas, oil or the atmosphere and labour into tradable commodities. The basis is that nature's elements become 'resources' and property rights are established and enforced. The question of whether it is viable at all to regulate everything via property rights and prices disappears. The main actors in these processes appear to be without any alternative. The general assumption of the *Green Economy* is that producing corporations and markets are functioning at their best when the state is providing the right framework.



THESIS 6: The Green Economy is favouring market-based instruments to counter the over-utilisation of resources, ecosystems and sinks.

Global capitalism is turning the atmosphere, oceans or land into deposits for over-utilised resources – thus into sinks. We are not only talking about our domestic waste, but also about huge lakes resulting from the waste of metal production in Hungary or the Amazon. As a remedy the prevailing economic theory promotes market-based instruments. The *Green Economy* is following this path. It has to be economically feasible to not pollute or over-utilise the environment. This is most obvious in climate policy, in which prices are assigned to the emitted greenhouse gases. Yet so far there has been no emission reduction. On the contrary, calculating managers probably suspect that by 2020 it will be good for their business if plenty of CO_2 is emitted.

THESIS 7: Germany is a prime example for the establishment of a hegemonic form of Green Economy.

After the disaster in Fukushima, the conservative-liberal government was somehow forced to compel energy companies to shut down some of the nuclear power plants. With its current so-called 'energy transition', the government is pushing for a power-confirming way of dealing with socio-ecological problems. Germany is advancing large-scale technological approaches like the offshore wind parks, subordinating renewable energy to the logic of competitiveness. Germany is an example for the way in which elements of a *Green Economy* are promoted without achieving any real social and ecological modes of productions.

THESIS 8: The Green Economy is socially and spatially selective and exclusive.

The example of Germany also shows: The promises of *Green Economy* will prove to be its downfall. By being selective and socially exclusive the *Green Economy* may succeed in establishing more green elements in the economy and society. Electric mobility may grow in Europe and renewable energies may become more important. Yet new green investment opportunities for the crisis-shaken capital provide the wrong incentives for addressing the economic and financial crisis, as they are based on growth. Neither will this break with non-sustainable modes of productions and ways of living, nor will it end the environmental degradation and the over-utilisation of global sinks. These are merely relocated to the places where the necessary resources originate, to rural regions, to the Global South or the deep sea. Especially from an internationalist perspective the imminent relocation of such problems into other regions of the world have to be criticised and prevented.

Emancipatory alternatives to the Green Economy

THESIS 9: A solidarity based society rests upon radical democratic decisions, and not on the logic of value and prices of the Green Economy.

Instead of designing the provision of natural resources in ever more exclusive manners it is essential to democratise this process radically. On a more abstract level, it means that the way in which societies appropriate nature, thus the way in which food, housing, communication and mobility is made possible, has to be at the centre of democratic debate. Examples for such a democratisation are visible in non-capitalist forms of dealing with water and biodiversity, in decentralised energy provision on the basis of renewable energies or in 'urban gardening'. A democratisation of societal relationships with nature implies a democratisation of technological development and likewise overcoming unequal gender relations and racist discrimination.

THESIS 10: The Green Economy discourse has to be confronted with public critique and practical activities of socio-ecological movements.

From an emancipatory perspective it is important to not criticise every form of ecological conversion, but the specific capitalist type in the guise of the *Green Economy*. We are siding with those who fight with emancipatory intentions and aims and who fight for fundamental worldwide transitions of economics and society. In Latin America the extraction of mineral resources, the building of large-scale dams and the monoculturisation of agriculture are current sites of contestation. By referring to these struggles as well as to the local debates over alternatives to the dominant development models, new avenues of thought and actions emerge, avenues which could possibly close permanently with the sealant of the *Green Economy*.

A long version of the paper in German is available under: www.buko.info