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Ecosocialism from the Margins

Hope for revolutionary change requires urgent climate action now. The energy transition must be as radical as possible to ensure the conditions for future struggles to overcome capitalism.

The 21st century is a century of crisis. Capitalist economic collapse dovetails with dire inequality, international and civil wars drive displacement and humanitarian catastrophe, xenophobia creeps into laws, and rising biodiversity loss imperils the planet's equilibrium. Climate change threatens to worsen every other aspect of these interlocking crises, making decarbonization the most urgent task on our to-do list. It's hard to fathom successfully tackling all other socioeconomic problems—let alone the gargantuan undertaking of overcoming capitalism—without coordinated international action.

A deep civilizational change, as Michael Löwy puts it, is needed to craft a truly just and free society within the ecosocialist paradigm. Such a transformation will not be possible unless we guarantee the material conditions on which to build any and all revolutionary prospects. Ecosocialists are well aware that only a revolutionary path can take us beyond the capitalist system. But they also understand that other clusters of change and reforms must garner support in their radical forms before a pre-revolutionary scenario appears on the horizon.

Climate scientists agree that we must take radical action by the end of this decade to prevent global temperatures rising over the 1.5°C limit. Leftists organizing around ecological issues share a similar consensus, but the situation changes when we consider the Left more broadly. As I write from Brazil, it is evident that the far-Right's recent gains in the

continent put everyone at risk of sinking deeper into climate emergency. The Bolsonaro government is openly anti-environment—he is even intent on allowing industrial mining in Indigenous territories. When nature is perceived only through the lens of exploitable natural resources, biodiversity becomes easily commodified. It is no coincidence, then, that the largest and most impactful social movements in Latin America are tied to land and territory, environmental protections, food sovereignty, and a strong opposition to multinational corporations, foreign investment, and their history of harmful dealings with right-wing—and sometimes moderate left—governments. These movements demonstrate that ecosocialism must be based on praxis. Those suffering the most from capitalism's exploitation know all too well that full commodification of nature means private profits and socialized impacts.

Political projects rooted in developmentalist and productivist ideologies are still common in socialist circles. Many in the progressive and even socialist Left in the countries at the periphery of capitalism, or the Global South, perceive their development and lifting millions out of poverty as antithetical to a rapid, clean energy transition and climate action. Current resources only enable one or the other, their logic suggests. However, even if developed countries take the lead by zeroing out their carbon emissions and helping finance an energy transition in the South, a true great transition depends on fostering and organizing peripheral countries' will to change

as well. Those who have contributed the least to the crisis are most likely to suffer the deepest impacts. This contradiction makes social movements, collectives, unions, and political parties at the margins of capitalism important voices in the call for change. It is paramount that we listen.

Building Ecosocialism in and from the South

Ecosocialism, a recent development in socialist history, first emerged to tackle modern environmental issues, as articulated since the 1970s. It promoted a critique of productivist perspectives and experiences within socialism, proposing that the socialist view of abundance prioritize quality over quantity. Later, in what political economist Kohei Saito calls the second stage of ecosocialism, the tradition incorporated the foundations of Marxist Ecology and Karl Marx's critique of capitalism's metabolic rift. This perspective offers a Marxist analysis of the profound way the current mode of production has altered nature, explicitly identifying that it is impossible to confront the ecological crisis—also a crisis of human society—within the capitalist system.

Now, the third stage of ecosocialism is being built from praxis that deals with the contradictions from the current system, pushing for alternatives to begin right away. Within this conversation, dispossessed peoples at the margins of the system have a lot to teach us

in terms of values and organizing practices. As the far-Right advances in Latin America, it is valuable to understand how grassroots campesino, Indigenous, and ecosocialist movements have boldly denounced human exploitation as inseparable from the exploitation of nature. Pushing for radical alternatives, these marginalized groups ought to be protagonists in constructing ecosocialist praxis.

In contrast, the ecocapitalist way, also known as “green economy” solutions, proposes a false path for protecting the environment. It aims to reverse some of the impacts of climate change while maximizing profits through the creation of new markets and the generalized commodification of ecological transition. Institutional spaces tasked with negotiating the terms of climate change mitigation have normalized ecocapitalism, including by promoting the market-friendly REDD+ approach to forest management and carbon trading as solutions, by encouraging the participation of business and industry NGOs in UN climate change events, and by supporting the idea that the private sector ought to be a crucial—if not *the* crucial—partner in reducing emissions. The result has been a very slow crawl toward decarbonizing energy, amounting to less of a proper transition than a diversification of the private and public infrastructure of energy provision.

This is particularly evident in countries that have promoted new investments—both public and private—in renewable energy sources while continuing to exploit dirty fuel in the name of trade and

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economic growth. For example, in January 2020, Germany announced a plan to phase out coal, but the end date is 18 years from now. China has grown its solar and wind capacity steadily for years, but investment recently dropped due to cuts to public subsidies. China also has invested in hundreds of new coal plants at home and abroad. Meanwhile, the private sector is eager to market itself as the provider



Xingu leader Sheyla Yakarepi Juruna speaks during a protest against the Belo Monte dam in Brazil in 2011.
(PEDRO BIONDI/FLICKR)

of “clean” energy, a variation of what anticapitalist activists have long slammed as greenwashing. Elites are cashing in on the renewable energy market—expected to hit a global value of \$1.5 trillion by 2025—by selling technology to governments and private citizens.

Ecosocialism criticizes market-based solutions, but it also condemns the slow pace of transition—if any—set by governments that still prioritize traditional, dirty industries as sources of GDP growth. This entails critiquing developmentalism and productivism as national ideologies. Ecosocialism breaks apart the meaning of development in order to rid it of its capitalist and colonial facets and enrich it with qualitative—rather than merely quantitative—notions of a good life. It also aims to scrap productivism—whose influence may limit socialism to a change in the ownership of the means of production without changing the paradigm of production—by eliminating planned obsolescence and

by fostering democratic planning of production around the questions of why, where, what for, how much, and for whom.

However, much of the theoretical development around ecosocialism has taken place among intellectual-activists of the North. Although there are ecosocialist organizations throughout the world, the majority of the Left, including the socialist Left, remains far from an ecosocialist synthesis in the South. Even discussions around *buen vivir* and Pachamama in Ecuador and Bolivia must simultaneously consider these concepts’ limits and political appropriation. Campesino and Indigenous social movements, whose values are deeply linked to the metabolism of nature, are well-respected and can be great leaders for change. Yet, when it comes to the economy, most of the Left in peripheral countries continues to rely on the separation between humans and nature in order to secure an image as

the representative of the urban proletariat, champion of industry, and master of local natural resources.

However, dependency theory shows us that perceiving nature simply as a source of commodities makes workers in places such as Brazil and Bolivia more vulnerable. Worse yet, movements that stand up to large, socioeconomically destructive projects led by leftist governments—as is the case of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in the Brazilian Amazon—are commonly vilified by leftist parties and unions that promote a productivist perspective of progress and job creation. Coal and oil continue to be major elements in leftist depictions of social and economic development, which is unsurprising when underdevelopment still deprives millions of working-class people around the globe of electricity, sanitation, and other basic infrastructure and services.

Although developmentalism and productivism remain the norm, the impacts of the climate crisis push the dispossessed to confront how the global economic system has pressured nature to an unprecedented level. Suffering the bulk of the negative consequences, the working classes at the margins of capitalism have the most to lose from ecological collapse—and the most to gain by leading the world towards a braver stance. The Left must pay attention and give enough room to groups that have long denounced the impending disaster. Certainly, there can be no socialist struggle without Indigenous struggle.

So far, most underdeveloped and developing countries have tried to catch up with developed ones through the rules of the capitalist system. This has produced a continuously dependent relationship. A radically different, ecosocialist-driven, development program that focuses on quality of living, full employment, carbon-free activities, and economic autonomy can rescue these countries from

the margins and set an example for the big players that continue to pit their financial targets against the planet's future. The challenge for the third stage of ecosocialism is to lead the way by developing through decarbonization while strengthening public sector and working-class organizations to create the material foundations for overthrowing the capitalist system once and for all.

21st Century Metabolism

A key ecosocialist discussion revolves around Karl Marx's concept of the metabolic rift, which demonstrates how the inherent logic of the capitalist mode of production is unsustainable. The true "realm of freedom," ecosocialists argue, must overcome this dynamic through the rational regulation of nature's metabolism. It is impossible to really grasp capitalism's impacts on the global ecosystem without deep consideration of colonial extraction and plunder.

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To take Brazil as an example, the rise of the far-Right, embodied in Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, clearly is entangled with agribusiness and industrial mining. As soon as he took office, Bolsonaro reduced the budget for climate change mitigation by 95 percent. The Ministry of the Environment is headed by Ricardo Salles, previously convicted of environmental fraud. Deforestation is on the rise, and environmental officers struggle to do their jobs without proper resources. When thousands of barrels of oil from an unknown source contaminated beaches across 11 states in 2019, the Brazilian government largely neglected the disaster. Bolsonaro even tried to blame the spill on a Greenpeace boat, alleging sabotage. The government only took

action when most of the damage was done, leaving response efforts up to local volunteers who risked their own health to remove oil and rescue animals. It is also well-known that Brazil's 2006 discovery of its rich offshore pre-salt oil reserves has affected geopolitical pressures, especially around the national oil company Petrobras.

Like many other developing and underdeveloped countries, Brazil experiences a dependency dynamic. Resource extraction accounts for a large share of the economy and attracts superpowers looking to profit off cheap primary goods, from crops to oil. Bolivia's Evo Morales, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, and even the previous Workers' Party (PT) government in Brazil have had contradictory approaches to environmental issues, pursuing economic growth through extractivism and tying social redistribution to the influx of commodity revenues. Their perspectives, common across the Pink Tide, fluctuated between a greater respect for nature compared to right-wing governments and an unbalanced focus on an idea of sustainable development that treated environmental costs as an after-thought to large projects and economic production. This type of negotiation with extractive interests can keep traditional national elites in a comfortable position of economic power while compromising national autonomy due to the economy's overreliance on commodity exports.

Such countries are uniquely positioned when it comes to resistance and the construction of radical alternatives. In most cases, if not for their dependence on the resource extraction that fuels the economic superpowers, these countries would contribute little to climate change. This dependency—the root of their contribution to climate crisis—impedes real development that moves away from environmentally degrading practices and builds resilient, climate-ready infrastructure. In a country as unequal as Brazil, the cities are not made for the people, but divided by class and the interests of each local elite. The result is too many cars, precarious public transit infrastructure with expensive individual fares, and so much concrete that rain inevitably leads to

flooding, illness, and death. Business as usual means that as long as the multinational mining company Vale can extract iron ore, the economy is relatively safe, and the social and environmental impacts—including dam collapses unleashing floods of mining waste—are just the expected externalities.

Thus far, the Left in such countries has taken the wrong approach to overcoming dependency by thinking it possible to challenge capitalism while maintaining its logic of production. Some have intensified extraction to take advantage of commodity prices but have failed to make the necessary gains in domestic industrial capacity. Others have invested in such a capacity, but they still fall prey to a few dire consequences of continuous reliance on extraction: the continuous enrichment of old elites, over-specialization that maintains dependence and conflicting geopolitical relations, and the perpetuation of the metabolic rift, whereby the unregulated use of nature leads to an array of short-, medium-, and long-term impacts.

A different approach to development—focused on autonomy and the creation of favorable ecological conditions for further organizing working-class interests—could help overcome dependency while leading the way towards a global ecological transition. This transition, then, could have the power to reconcile and unite all oppressed people around the ecosocialist paradigm.

Decarbonize and Organize!

Ecology is a pivotal point of convergence for the world's oppressed and dispossessed. Environmental impacts fall disproportionately on the poor. Women are more likely to take on extra social reproduction burdens after environmental disasters. Cities designed around capital lack infrastructure in their peripheries and are very racialized. Ecological connections foster not only solidarity, but deep syntheses between struggles.

The banner of food sovereignty, for example, connects landless workers to healthcare professionals to animal liberation activists. Climate activists,

policymakers, and every labor union interested in full employment, training, and better jobs all share a concern for radical change in the energy system. Ecosocialists understand the power of organizing the working class in a metabolic way—that is, through an understanding that if class and oppression are inseparable from ecological conditions, then struggles must act accordingly. Rather than different struggles simply marching alongside each other, the horizon calls for making connections around the ecological underpinnings of the material conditions for survival—and even revolution. We can no longer separate labor organizing from feminist, anti-racist, LGBTQI+, animal liberation, prison abolition, anti-imperialist, and self-determination struggles. The metabolic ecological view shows that they don't simply share similar interests, but root causes.

As environmental concerns become ever more pressing, a few sectors of the Left have finally realized their importance. We must be strategic. Higher sensitivity to environmental issues presents an opportunity for politicization so that we can, at the same time, reject inherently flawed “green” capitalist proposals and learn to build the conditions for a radical horizon.

At some level, this requires ecosocialists to consider reform and revolution. Ecosocialism is a revolutionary perspective, yet it must be aware of the mediations required to guarantee the ecological conditions for a revolution. The urgency of climate change calls for decarbonization while still under capitalism. This does not mean, however, accepting such a plan on capitalist terms. The logic must be to decarbonize fast, with a focus on the public system, fighting privatization at all costs, and strengthening popular movements and organizations. A decarbonized mode of production is necessary to ensure that when workers are ready to overthrow capitalist structures, there is still a healthy planet on which to build socialism.

This is why projects aimed at outstripping the carbon economy, such as the Green New Deal, propose a transition from a carbon-based economy to

renewables. This transition requires change in many areas, but it is not what socialists call a transitional program, let alone a socialist revolutionary endeavor. Decarbonization is both an immediate necessity and a material prerequisite for any transitional program and the very prospect of organizing to abolish private property. To be successful, decarbonization efforts need to be highly coordinated, but in a bottom-up fashion. Third-stage ecosocialism calls for mobilizing entire working-class sectors while also growing the Left by attracting those concerned about the viability of life into the next century.

Of course, green capitalists have also tried to present their own version of decarbonization. This vision revolves around private property and profit margins, allows for more extractivism, takes a slow pace, and demonstrates a dangerous optimism for undeveloped technologies that may solve our carbon problem one day without altering production. Unless matters such as pollution and biodiversity loss can be commodified, these approaches neglect elements of the ecological crisis other than carbon. The ecosocialist task in the face of the Green New Deal is to make the proposal—its goals, speed of implementation, and involvement of workers and their interests—as radical as possible. This also demands an internationalist perspective that considers the transfer of financial resources—as an incentive but also as a kind of reparation—to support colonized and affected countries in transitioning away from carbon. This process must also ensure local autonomy, making way for the South's political contributions to ensure that the system will indeed change.

The challenge is how to bring the whole Left to this understanding—and not just in terms of convincing arguments, but as praxis. Brazil's Petrobras offers an important example. It is paramount that the oil reserves in the pre-salt layers—found thousands of yards deep in the ocean's subsoil and very expensive to extract—stay as put as possible. Foreign, private sector pressure aims to weaken the state's role in Petrobras, and this has affected the company's workers as well as consumer prices for oil and gas. A

common perspective, shared by the Petrobras union, argues for complete nationalization of the company so that the reserves support national sovereignty—rather than imperialist interests—by guaranteeing Brazil 100 years of energy autonomy. From a standard developmentalist perspective without any ecological regard, this sounds like a dream workers’ sovereignty argument. It is, however, unrealistic, as it puts the whole world in danger of a sped-up climate catastrophe. This demonstrates the importance of fostering ecosocialism in Brazil and the urgency of developing a decarbonization program.

Privatization evidently would lead to intense extractivism without any rewards for the workers or the country, so it must be fought on all fronts. Yet, it is also important for countries like Brazil to produce their own decarbonizing “deal” so that labor unions in carbon-based industries can become involved. Only a fully nationalized, worker-controlled Petrobras will be able to posit the necessary steps for a just transition based on: a moratorium on new explorations, fast diversification of the company’s activities into renewables, and job training, compensation, and a jobs guarantee.

This is not entirely novel—Norway’s national oil company Equinor has expressed a commitment to bringing the country’s emissions close to zero by 2050. Petrobras invested in renewables in the past as a way to “prepare the company for a low-carbon economy future,” but it is currently disinvesting from those sectors, including by selling its wind power plants in early in 2020. Private interests in the pre-salt layer and the government’s privatization intentions have set Petrobras back. A radical decarbonizing program that includes the national oil company, with new priorities led by unionized workers, would have the potential to not only reclaim Petrobras’ earlier renewables plans, but also go even further than Equinor’s targets. This change would empower other national oil companies in the region as well and could help to reroute the future of Mexico’s Pemex, among others.

As the authors of the 2019 book *A Planet to Win* put it, a just transition depends on seizing public

control of energy resources, and it will only be just if it focuses on improving people’s lives. Besides averting climate collapse, this kind of decarbonizing deal contributes to the ecosocialist horizon: There can be no just energy transition without organizing, and the fruits of this organizing can move towards overcoming capitalism. Restructuring the economy away from carbon while centering the working class makes it possible to dream of cities with efficient housing, better modes of transportation, preventive health care, an agricultural system built on food sovereignty, industry without planned obsolescence, and more time for leisure and rest.

We cannot decree or simply vote the capitalist system away. To ensure an ecologically and politically sustainable post-capitalist society, we must build the conditions to make such a future possible and enduring. A viable revolutionary alternative takes the conditions it can build under capitalism, preserves the gains, changes what is necessary, and then transcends the barriers capitalism has imposed on emancipation. In sum, to truly abolish capitalism, we must make it obsolete. A society whose mode of production attends to peoples’ necessities and quality of life without exploitation or destruction renders the capitalist way outdated, irrelevant, and undesirable.

Organizing away from carbon can be a valuable step towards wide, international organizing away from capital, too. A just energy transition in the South will push us in this direction by hitting capitalism at the root of extraction, exploitation, and colonization—none of which have any place in an ecosocialist society. Coordinated action from the margins may be just what we need. **■**

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