



Refusing Ecocide¹

From Fossil Capitalism to a Liveable World

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Abstract

To place the ongoing disaster of climate breakdown in political-economic context and explore future possibilities, this article mobilizes three concepts central to historical materialism which form a “trifecta of power”: accumulation, imperialism, and hegemony. These are applied to the current regime of obstruction, comprised of an amalgamation of the deeply seated project of fossil capitalism and the emergent project of climate capitalism. Three alternative projects—Green New Deal, Degrowth, and Buen Vivir (“living well”)—move us toward real solutions, but need to be braided into a wider transformative project that addresses the trifecta of power that reproduces capitalism as a way of life. Eco-socialism provides such a synthesis. It offers a just, viable economic alternative to capitalism capable of addressing the climate emergency. It provides an alternative hegemonic project capable of unifying a post-capitalist historical bloc. It challenges the geopolitical economy of ecological imperialism and opens toward a world order organized for cooperation, solidarity, and peace. These gains stem from three important elements in the historical materialist theory informing eco-socialism. First, a comprehension of the dialectical relation between forces and relations of production as central to socio-ecological transformation. Second, an emphasis on the imperative to replace the anarchy of the market, capital’s governing mechanism with democratic planning. Third, identification of the social forces that can be brought together to form an historical bloc capable of leading the transformation. Our current trajectory is perilous, but there is still time to correct course.

Keywords: Climate Crisis, Fossil Capitalism, Ecological Imperialism, Climate Capitalism, Eco-Socialism, Historical Materialism

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As I revise this text in March 2025, the habitability of our planet for a human population of eight billion is in peril. The situation has been described as climate crisis, climate breakdown, climate emergency; but, most ominously, as ecocide. In his eponymously titled book, David Whyte (2020: 2) defined ecocide as “the deliberate destruction of our natural environment,” and pointed his finger directly at the profit-driven corporations that “are wrecking our world.”

Certainly, the corporations that dominate the fossil fuel sector and their predecessor firms are the major culprits, as Richard Heede (2014) has shown (cf. InfluenceMap 2024). Their investment decisions have directly caused the climate crisis and continue to exacerbate it. But the carbon majors are empowered by other actors that enable and legitimate fossil capital, comprising a “regime of obstruction” that protects the investments and revenue streams of fossil-fuel corporations and blocks meaningful climate action (Carroll 2021b). The key actors in this regime include the banks and institutional investors that finance the industry, the captured regulators that green-light new investments, the government ministries in regular dialogue with industry lobbyists, and a range of organizations that legitimate the industry, from think tanks, industry groups and business councils to corporate and astro-turf media and business schools (Carroll 2021b).

Accumulation, Imperialism, Hegemony

To place the regime of obstruction in context and to explore alternatives, this article mobilizes three concepts central to historical materialism: namely, accumulation, imperialism, and hegemony. Core to the political economy of advanced capitalism, these enable us to track the development of fossil capitalism and climate crisis, and most importantly, to assess a range of proposed solutions.

Within historical materialism, capital *accumulation* is understood as a dialectical relation between capitalist relations and forces of production. These categories delineate, on the one hand, the social relations into which people enter as they materially produce and reproduce a specific way of life (i.e., relations of production) and, on the other hand, “*the practices, objects, techniques and knowledges through which we are purposefully linked to and transform the rest of nature*” (i.e., forces of production) (Graham 2021: 2, emphasis in original). The distinction between “forces” and “relations” is important but essentially analytical: in lived reality, they interpenetrate and are indispensable to each other. The complex combination of these mutually constitutive relations and forces comprises the capitalist mode of production, which includes the capital-wage labor relation between capitalism’s fundamental classes as well as inter-capitalist relations in which capitalists compete with each other for shares of the total surplus value appropriated from labor. Within this mode of production, capital itself functions as self-expanding value, creating a macro dynamic of “endless growth” punctuated by recurring crises. As capital self-expands it reproduces its own premises on an extended scale (Marx 1956), in particular, the capital-labor relation. Inter-capitalist competition drives this self-expansion, not only accelerating the treadmill but developing forces of production, particularly as science becomes fully integrated into the

capital accumulation process. Since productive forces are permeated by productive relations “progress” is conditioned and framed by the dominant position capital holds in those relations. As for the capital-labor relation, Marx’s key insight is that labor power’s use-value, its capacity to create new value greater than what the capitalist advances as the wage, enables the appropriation of surplus value, which is at the core of capitalist exploitation, and which enables capitalist class dominance over both the present and (via investment) the future.

On the question of capital accumulation and ecological degradation, Marx (1976: 639) himself argued that capitalist production only progresses “by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker.” After a century of misreading Marx as a Promethean, scholars began to recover his ecology. In 1980, Alan Schnaiberg noted that capital accumulation entails a treadmill of production in which increasing extraction from ecosystems combines with increasing (unwelcome) additions to them. The treadmill accelerates as inter-capitalist competition compels reinvestment of profit—increasing environmental depletion and degradation. A few years later, James O’Connor (1988, 1991) identified what he termed capitalism’s “second contradiction.” This resides in the interaction of capital logic with ecosystems, as “nature’s productivity is self-limiting,” yet for capital these limits are merely “barriers to overcome” (O’Connor 1998: 181). This contradiction engenders underproduction of the “conditions of production” —evident in environmental degradation—deepening capitalism’s crisis tendencies.

Of course, the conditions of production are not an inexhaustible collection of natural resources; they are elements of living systems, including human labor itself. Jason Moore (2016) has argued that the result of capitalism’s epochal global expansion is a sharp contraction of potential sources of the “cheap nature” that has been integral to capitalist profits. For John Bellamy Foster (2012) and colleagues, accumulation disrupts and degrades the metabolic processes that are integral to living systems. In particular, capitalist industrialization has required burning fossil fuels and extraction from ever-expanding resource frontiers. This has created a rift in the carbon cycle—as carbon dioxide and methane accumulate in the atmosphere while carbon sinks are degraded (Clark and York 2005).

A related but more focused literature, emphasizing what Lewis Mumford noted in 1931 as capitalism’s carboniferous character, begins in earnest with Elmer Altvater’s (2006) foundational conceptualization of fossil capitalism. From the industrial revolution onward, industrial capital has been powered primarily by buried sunshine; and as reserves decline the costs of extraction increase while the degradation of nature, particularly through carbon pollution, intensifies. Andreas Malm’s (2016) theorization of fossil capital situates the nineteenth century shift to coal within the context of class struggle. He shows the necessity of ever-increasing extraction, emissions, and global heating as fossil capital accumulates. As capitalism, powered by fossilized carbon, has scaled up to global level it has pressed against ecological limits and has begun to eradicate the very bases for living systems—the climate crisis being the most fateful aspect of this ecocide.

Within historical materialism, *imperialism* has been a particularly important concept in understanding how, in the era of monopoly capital, businesses and states have been entangled in

geopolitical relations of expropriation and domination (Brewer 1980; Hobsbawm 1989; Fraser 2022). Within historical materialism, imperialism highlights the *uneven development of fossil capitalism on a global scale* from the late nineteenth century forward and the *role of advanced capitalist states in shaping global capitalism to suit the interests of big, internationalizing capital*. Broadly defined, imperialism amounts to “the struggle of large, monopolistic capital over economic territory, actively aided and assisted by states” (Ghosh, Chakraborty, and Das 2022: 70). For Frame (2022: 509, emphasis in original), ecological imperialism results in “*negative socio-ecological impacts or ecological debt or ecologically unequal exchange for peripheral countries, which cannot be truly compensated in a monetary sense.*” In ecological unequal exchange, transactions between the advanced capitalist core economies and the extractive periphery eventuate in a deterioration in the ecological situation on capitalism’s periphery as expropriation drives resource consumption, accumulation and technological advances in the advanced capitalist North (Frame 2022).

For our purposes, imperialism highlights the uneven development of fossil capitalism on a global scale from the late nineteenth century forward (Carroll 2020) and the geopolitical role of advanced capitalist states in shaping global capitalism to suit the interests of big, internationalizing capital. Building on colonialism, ecological imperialism has relegated peripheral formations to subaltern status—as “defenseless populations...dispossessed by a new round of corporate land grabs, aimed at cornering supplies of energy, water, arable land, and ‘carbon offsets’” (Fraser 2022: 68)—while generating tendencies toward both rivalry among great powers and cooperation in repressing socialist aspirations in the global South. The destructive impacts of extractivist accumulation have been experienced mainly in that majority world (Gago and Mezzadra 2017; Nygren, Kröger, and Gills 2022), while higher strata of the Northern proletariat have won some measure of “carbon democracy” and material affluence (Mitchell 2011), ideologically integrating them into capitalism as a way of life.

The third core concept in understanding fossil capitalism, climate capitalism, and our current quandary is *hegemony*. Simply put, hegemony is rule with consent of the ruled, a form of *leadership* in which persuasion predominates over coercion but is backed up by the threat of coercion. Combined with accumulation and imperialism, the struggle for hegemony has been a fundamental process in the development of fossil capitalism. Successful hegemony is evident in “the ability of the ruling classes to enforce their interests in such a way that they are seen as the general interest by the subaltern classes” (Brand and Wissen 2024: 279). As a political and cultural construction, the general interest aligns the needs of subalterns (for jobs, subsistence, recreation, etc.) with the particular, long-term interests of capital, in what Jessop (2024: 269) terms a hegemonic project which “can resolve the abstract problem of conflicts between particular interests and the general interest.”

A hegemonic project is a complex of policy frameworks and political visions of the good life, extending to the activities of a host of non-state actors in civil society (from Rotary Clubs through churches, to social-media platforms), and to common-sense understanding and desires of the subalterns aligned with the project. When such alignment is achieved—satisfying the needs of

capital for self-expansion and incorporating (many of) the masses—one can speak of an “historical bloc” that secures stable support for the regime. Within the bloc, “translation” of particular interests into broad ethico-political ones “not only helps to co-constitute economic structures but also provides them with their rationale and legitimacy” (Sum and Jessop 2013: 199).

In the twentieth century, hegemonic projects (Jessop 2002), featuring liberal promises of freedom and Promethean celebrations of progress, attained persuasive power especially in world capitalism’s core, to be exported to the global South as “modernization,” as fossil capital accumulation became stitched into common sense. The three “golden decades” after World War II coincided with the Great Acceleration in carbon emissions, and global warming. As Matt Huber (2013) has shown in the archetypal United States, fossil fuels gained pride of place, as “lifeblood.” Individualized suburbanites experienced automobility and home ownership as sources of privatized power. Within the capitalist democracies, Fordist mass production for mass consumption drew high-wage fractions of the proletariat into an expanding historical bloc, through the everyday practices of consumerism, automobility, and suburbanization. The imperial mode of living linked capitalist centers to societies elsewhere, whose socio-ecologies were organized to transfer products of cheap labor and elements of nature from global South to North (Brand and Wissen 2021). For the biosphere, the cumulative result was exponentially accelerating carbon emissions trending toward ecological overshoot, and ultimately ecocide.

Climate disaster has rolled out amid waves of economic booms and crises. By the mid-1970s, the long post-war boom had collapsed into a quagmire of falling profits, stagflation, and rising state deficits. These developments undercut the basis for Fordist class compromise, precipitating a decline of democratic capitalism and its chief protagonist, social democracy. The result was an attenuation of the post-war historical bloc, intensified globalization, and the rise of neoliberal democracy (Cox 1987). But the neoliberal boom was short-lived. By 2008 a massive financial crisis signaled its exhaustion. Since that time, no viable alternative to neoliberalism has emerged, in the global North, from either the capitalist side or a disorganized left. The scenario is one of organic crisis, bringing “a great variety of morbid symptoms” (Gramsci 1971)—chief among them the rise of the far right. Meanwhile, as the best veins of carbon resources became depleted, fossil capital turns increasingly to extreme carbon extraction exacerbating ecological degradation (Pineault 2018).

The organic crisis can be seen as hastening capitalism’s death drive as climate breakdown visibly accelerates while Southern bourgeoisies embrace the imperial mode of living—even as a declining U.S. hegemon resorts to militaristic new imperialism in shoring up its international dominance. The contradictions have inspired a diverse array of movements for climate sanity, sharpening hegemonic struggle as fractions of capital shift from stage one to stage two denialism—accepting the findings of climate science but denying their clear political implications (Derber 2010).

As the crisis deepens, the regime of obstruction has been pivoting, from fossil capitalism legitimated through stage one denialism to an emergent project that protects capital’s “economic

nucleus” (Gramsci 1971) while appearing to address the climate crisis. The hegemonic project at the center of this regime is climate capitalism.

Climate Capitalism

Technological and market fetishism frame the concept of “climate capitalism,” also known as “green capitalism,” “green growth,” and “clean growth.” Whatever the moniker, these approaches “all propagate a mix of technocratic-technological-financial-market solutions for all central issues concerning the climate crisis” (Ilc 2021: 345), neglecting to address “the existing unsustainable politico-economic arrangements” (Ilc 2021: 345), which are driving the crisis. Committed to “harness[ing] the forces of capitalism to tackle the climate problem” (Rathi 2024: 2), climate capitalism is grounded in the assumption that to deal properly with the climate crisis, high growth rates are needed. As new centers of accumulation emerge around renewable energy and the like, the world can transition to sustainability without impairing accumulation (Surprise 2018). Paradoxically, the project relies on the assumption that “the main cause of the crisis, economic growth, is crucial to the solution of the very same crisis” (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen 2023: 357). The tight link between capital accumulation and climate breakdown suggests that it is not possible “to break the connection between economic growth and emissions on a global scale and in the time available” (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen 2023: 357).

Climate capitalism follows in the grooves of neoliberal hegemony, privileging markets and the creation of profit opportunities over state-led planning. Within this policy mix, however, the state still plays an active role “as a facilitator of new market domains and as a ‘de-riskier’ of private capital” (Buller 2022: 274), as public policy both safeguards and shepherds capital “into previously undesirable areas through a heady blend of market making, incentive, and guarantee” (Buller 2022: 274). Green capitalist solutions, then, add up to a privatized response to the climate crisis, seeking “to transfer the complex, ethically and socially fraught, and inherently political questions presented by ecological crisis from democratically contestable terrain to the private authority of markets, with outcomes ultimately driven by the self-interest of rational actors motivated by profit” (Buller 2022: 274).

The electric car provides a good entry point into a wider discussion of ecological modernization. We can see how the car itself, and all the ancillary industries it boosts along its commodity chain (lithium extraction being only one), offer tremendous opportunities for accumulation. Moreover, its promotion and marketing contribute to a neoliberal hegemonic project that minimizes the need for structural change in addressing the climate crisis, placing the burden mainly on the ecologically-conscious consumer and the governments that strive to incentivize “smart choices” by investors and consumers alike. In the shadows of this scenario is the third piece of our trifecta of power: imperialism.

There is an unmistakable geography to the creation of “natural capital” within market-centred ecological modernization schemes. On an industrial scale, green energy is often devastating; it is “completely tied into some of the biggest colonial land grabs in the twenty-first century: Lithium

mining, wind parks, solar farms” (Gelderloos and Dunlap 2023: 5). The conversion of “nature” into “capital” might not serve the needs of humans and the ecosystems in which they are embedded, but it does serve a crucial purpose within a capitalism struggling to manage a dual crisis, both ecological and economic. At its heart, Buller (2022: 255) observes, climate capitalism “opens up vast new terrains for the expansion of capital into the natural world. And for no industry has this proven more appealing than finance, which has seized upon the speculative prospects of this new frontier.”

These new terrains are typically in the global South, supporting Brand and Wissen’s (2024) thesis that the imperial mode of living requires “elsewheres” that form the invisible premise for an unsustainable way of life in capitalism’s core. In fact, carbon markets and offsets are integral to eco-imperialism and “new corporate enclosures.” To attract investors, carbon offsets must be accompanied by socio-ecological relations that “ensure a pristine carbon sequestering landscape” (Richards and Lyons 2015: 211); hence “carbon market governing regimes require landscapes and ‘nature’ (including trees and carbon) to be ‘hemmed in’ so as to minimise leakage and ensure permanence” (Richards and Lyons 2015: 211).

In fact, global warming is already ruining rosy fantasies of ecological “permanence.” Each summer in Canada, for instance, wildfires are consuming enormous areas of boreal forest, which have served as carbon sinks but are now carbon mega-bombs. In the 1990s, Canada’s managed forest removed on average 160 million tonnes of carbon annually from the atmosphere, but by early September of 2023, wildfires had released 2 billion tonnes. *The carbon released in the 2023 wildfires amounted to three times the total emissions from Canada’s carbon-dependent economy* (670 million tonnes) (Cecco 2023). When a carbon offset is marketed as preserving a forest that would otherwise be cut, or creating a new forest to fix carbon, there can be no assurance of permanence.

As market-based measures have proven ineffective, climate capitalism has turned to more technologically complex fixes, which fall under the rubric of geoengineering. Land-based geoengineering captures carbon from the atmosphere and fixes it, particularly through Direct Air Capture (DAC, discussed below). Solar Radiation Management (SRM) is air-based. In the most popular SRM scenario, sulfur-based aerosols would be injected into the stratosphere, with the intent to “modify Earth’s albedo to reflect a small percentage of incoming solar radiation” (Surprise 2018: 1230).

Considering the dubious validity of carbon offsetting (Lang 2024) and the associated the eco-imperialism in securing “pristine” land, and considering the questionable feasibility of the techno-silver bullets on offer (particularly SRM geoengineering), climate capitalism comprises what activists call a bundle of “false solutions” to the climate crisis. They are false in part because they are positioned within a hegemonic project that refuses to address the elephant in the room: capital, its growth imperative and its anti-democratic power within human affairs. As Parenti (2022: 131) reminds us, “we face what Marx described as a contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production.” Climate capitalism ignores this contradiction and focuses exclusively on transforming forces of production, in ways that suit the existing relations of production. But in

fact, capitalism's social relations—the economic dominance of a small class of profit-driven capitalists, the financialized character of contemporary global accumulation, the imperative to “grow or die”—are now holding back real possibilities for avoiding ecocide by transitioning to a fully sustainable and socially just way of life (Graham 2021).

In the struggle for hegemony, climate capitalism offers a system-affirming response to climate crisis and seems to carry minimal costs. It promises to reconfigure the forces of production to avert runaway climate change yet protects the relations of production. It portends a molecular shift in the historical bloc, as fossil capital enters managed decline while renewable energy substitutes, and associated workforces, grow under the control of big capital (Carroll 2021b). Climate capitalism has little to offer the majority world; indeed, shifting to renewables will intensify extractivism while market-based carbon-offset schemes continue the imperialist legacy of land-grabs in the global South. Moreover, compared to the accelerating realities of climate breakdown climate capitalism's pace of change is glacial; and capital's growth imperative ultimately precludes a shrinking footprint. Finally, the real impact of SRM, at scale, may prove disastrous (Surprise 2018).

Climate capitalism, in its various renditions, amounts to what Gramsci called a “passive revolution,” a transformation “from above” that is pushed along a conservative path that protects and even restores the basis for ruling-class power (Morton 2024). In climate capitalism “A package of ‘green growth’, corporate renewables, offsets for carbon sinks, ‘offshoring’ of emissions, and ‘net zero’ commitments are offered ‘from above’” (Goodman and Morton 2023: 1260). Meanwhile, at quotidian scale, the passive revolution appeals to subjectivities normalized within fossil-fueled consumer capitalism, neoliberal individualism, and lifestyle politics. Implicitly, the regime mobilizes fear of change, even as widening immiseration enlarges the pool of potential recruits for the far right, in the absence of a robust left alternative.

Refusing Ecocide: From Climate Capitalism to Democratic Eco-Socialism

Fortunately, false solutions are not the only initiatives on offer in addressing the climate crisis. Three alternative projects move us toward real solutions. Two of them, issuing from the global North, argue either for an extension of social-democratic reform to the climate crisis (the Green New Deal/GND) or a shift away from capital's growth imperative (Degrowth). A third project, emanating from Indigenous lifeways in the global South (specifically, the Andean region of South America) is *Buen Vivir*—“living well”—which presents a deep critique of imperialism and extractivist capitalism. Like the GND and Degrowth, *Buen Vivir* includes strands of counter-hegemonic politics as well as currents that can be contained fairly readily within the passive revolution of climate capitalism. In our era, the political challenge is to braid the counter-hegemonic stands into a powerful, transformative project informed by historical-materialist insights.

Like the New Deal of the 1930s, the GND is a social-democratic project, emphasizing the need to reduce advanced capitalism's massive social inequities, but unlike that earlier project, the

GND directly addresses the ecological crisis. In a GND, states steer investment away from fossils and provide a “just transition” to workers and communities affected by socio-ecological transformation. Although initially formulated as a national project, as Robert Pollin (2023) remarks, the scale of the climate crisis obviously requires coordinated climate action. He advances a global GND that “will not replace capitalism with socialism... [but] will actually need to take root and flourish within the interstices of capitalism” (Pollin 2023: 163). However, a global GND, according to Pollin, will shift priorities from capitalist acquisitiveness to ecological sanity and egalitarianism.

The most important insight in the literature on degrowth is the urgent need for an energy descent, indeed, for a decrease in the total material throughput of global production. In this, degrowth closely follows the critique of “green growth” and climate capitalism (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021: 322). As a radical vision, degrowth goes further than Green New Deals in its insistence on rejecting both the capitalist growth imperative and the sanctity of the commodity. Jason Hickel (2020: 235) asserts that “by decommodifying public goods, expanding the commons, shortening the working week and reducing inequality, we can enable people to access the goods that they need to live well without requiring additional growth in order to do so.”

Alberto Acosta (2020: 89) suggests that “we can understand *Buen Vivir* to be persons living in harmony with themselves, with other people in the community, harmony within the community and between humans and nature.” This worldview differs fundamentally from the project of capitalist development. Emanating from “indigenous people’s modes of living” (Lang 2022: 1287), “it is not part of an expansive and accumulative logic of progress and infinite growth, but rather seeks plenitude in balance and sufficiency” (Lang 2022: 1287). These values accord with degrowth ideas; indeed, the latter can be read as attempting to decolonize hegemonic narratives of progress “by valorizing alternative conceptions of the good life” (Albert 2021: 96). However, in *Buen Vivir*, the understanding of living well extends to a rejection of capitalist relations of production and an insistence on rebuilding solidaristic human community.

Each of these projects offers some hope as we lean into what will be an epic struggle. Yet each, when viewed through the lens of historical materialism, misses key aspects of capitalism’s structure of domination. Let’s take stock at this point, by posing three questions flowing from the trifecta of power discussed earlier:

- *Regarding accumulation:* In what ways does the project challenge the capitalist mode of production (both relations and forces of production), and present an alternative capable of addressing the climate emergency?
- *Regarding imperialism:* In what ways does the project challenge the geopolitical economy of ecological imperialism and the imperial mode of living premised upon it, and present an alternative that can provide a basis for global climate justice?
- *Regarding hegemony:* In what ways does the project challenge the hegemony of fossil capitalism and climate capitalism and provide an alternative hegemonic project capable of unifying a post-fossil historical bloc?

Green New Deals are effectively projects of climate capitalism from below. Operating within a social-democratic political logic, they seek to shift power and resources incrementally toward a regulated, post-fossil capitalism with a human face. Workers displaced in the restructuring would transition to jobs in growing sectors, and renewables would replace fossils in recomposing the forces of production. A global GND could generalize these practices, but the treadmill of production would continue to demand increasing resources extracted mainly from the South. The GND is a project of the global North and has very little to offer the majority world.

In contrast to the GND, Degrowth directly addresses the capitalist growth imperative; but it does so in a confused way, and without much attention to capitalism's relations of production. Although climate mitigation requires lowering throughput and resource use, Degrowth focuses solely on the productive forces of capitalism without mentioning "what the social relations of production underlying the alternative system will look at and how it will allow...lower material abundance to be universally applicable and acceptable" (Chen 2023: 166). The semantic equation $growth = accumulation = forces\ of\ production$ leads to the mistaken conclusion that undoing capital's growth imperative requires diminishing the forces of production. As I have mentioned, forces of production refer not to "growth" or "technology," but to the entire gamut of practices through which humanity purposefully engages with nonhuman nature. Real "progress" consists in improving these practices in ways that enable human thriving and ecological health.

Ultimately, as Jason Hickel (2023: 49) recognizes, Degrowth (like the GND) is not a comprehensive project, but "an element *within* a broader struggle for ecosocialist (and anti-imperialist) transformation." Originating in the professional class within global capitalism's core, Degrowth is "tailored for the Global North where an imperial mode of living prevails" (Isikara and Narin 2023: 34). Although its critique of extractivism calls attention to eco-imperialism, Degrowth "is not a desirable and viable path for the Global South" (Isikara and Narin 2023: 34). It shares this Northern bias with the GND.

Finally, on the issue of hegemonic struggle, my view is that Degrowth is a very poor way of framing the alternative to fossil (and climate) capitalism. As Stuart Hall (1988) observed, the left must struggle for hegemony on terrain shaped primarily by the ruling historical bloc. The imperial mode of living—a reality for many in the global North and still an aspiration for many in the global South—forms part of that terrain, validating the virtues of consumer capitalism, and the indelible need for "growth." In the circumstances, centering a counter-hegemonic project upon a vision of *subtraction*—what Huber (2022) calls a politics of less—is self-defeating.

This brings us to an important virtue in *Buen Vivir*. Its deep critique of capitalism coupled with the vision of a good life for all, within communities that care for people and nonhuman nature, does not begin with a rhetorical subtraction. "Living well" is a compelling alternative to the frenetic compulsion to "have more." Emanating from the subaltern South, *Buen Vivir* delivers a strong critique of extractive imperialism while emphasizing the need to shift away from capital's growth imperative. Obviously, "a good life for all" is a more resonant framing than "degrowth," yet *Buen Vivir*'s challenge to capitalist hegemony goes deeper, questioning the instrumentalization

of nonhuman nature that has been central to the capitalist and colonial project. Without invoking Marxian vocabulary (and, it must be said, without a clear understanding of productive forces), *Buen Vivir* presents a critique of capitalism as a way of life.

However, *Buen Vivir* has forked into three strands: an Indigenist strand (focused on avoiding exogenous, colonial interference in its own territories); a state-centered, reformist strand; and a socialist strand receptive to (neo)Marxist and other left discourses (Beling, et al. 2021). If the state-reformist strand has tended to devolve toward GND politics, the Indigenist strand has a localist focus, integrally tied to the land and thus the lifeways (to be) reclaimed from the colonists. But beyond the virtue of a good example, such “postcapitalist localism” (Sharzer 2012: 125) has little relevance in itself to the existential crisis humanity faces, and no decolonized Indigenous community will be protected from climate breakdown.

Each of these projects is internally diverse, containing currents receptive to eco-socialism. As an alternative to fossil and climate capitalism based in historical materialism, eco-socialism is distinct in three respects. First, it views the dialectical relation between *forces and relations of production* as central to socio-ecological transformation. Second, it emphasizes the imperative to replace the anarchy of the market, capital’s governing mechanism, with *democratic planning* at different scales, from local to global. Third, it identifies the social forces, already in motion but not politically integrated, that can be brought together to form an *historical bloc* capable of leading the transformation.

Transforming Forces and Relations of Production

Regarding the first issue, eco-socialism emphasizes the need for a double transformation, of productive forces and relations. This contrasts not only with climate capitalism and Degrowth, but with the Promethean emphasis in twentieth-century socialist regimes on expanding productive forces in their existing capitalist form. For eco-socialism, it is not a matter of *shrinking* (or simply “growing”) the forces of production but of *greening* them and restoring a healthy metabolic relation between our species and nonhuman nature. Given the accelerating pace of climate breakdown, effective climate-change mitigation will very likely require some combination of geoengineering initiatives, along with renewable energy and a reduction in material throughput. The “disaster capitalism” that Naomi Klein (2007) analyzed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina must be countered with a “disaster socialism”² that responds to the ecological crisis capitalism has created. This means supplementing the core goal of rapid fossil-fuel wind-down with remedial efforts to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas. Moving beyond “present capitalist perversions” (Malm and Carton 2021: 33) also means “refusing to let any negative emissions, imagined or real, ever justify continued ‘positive’ ones” (Malm and Carton 2021: 33).

This discussion of the need for green forces of production has already directed us to the relations of production, which strongly shape those forces. To address the current state of

² I thank Christopher Chase-Dunn for this apt term.

ecological overshoot, capitalist dominance within those relations must be countered with democratic, public control of our productive relations with each other. In our current circumstances, this means taking class politics seriously, as Matthew Huber (2022) has in *Climate Change as Class War*. A critic of Degrowth, Huber (2022) finds promise in a radicalized GND, including a deep, just transition, to shift the balance of class forces while implementing climate mitigation policies. Emphasizing decommodification, a radicalized GND is about “shifting power and control over society’s resources. The most ecologically beneficial part of this program is that it aims to transfer key industries from private to public ownership so that environmental goals can predominate over profits” (Huber 2022: 208).

Inspired by Marx’s ([1875] 1970) *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which outlined his own vision of post-capitalism, Kohei Saito (2022: 233) envisages a transformation in the relations of production, “abolishing the excessive division of labor and making labor more democratic and attractive” in order to ensure “the free and autonomous activity of individual workers.” He points out that although such liberatory change could decrease labor productivity (a critical issue for capital), the forces of production would actually expand (Saito 2022). For historical materialism, the most important force of production is the human being; hence, the empowerment, rather than the diminishment, of workers within their labor processes is a fundamental gain in the forces of production.

Democratic Planning

For Marx ([1875] 1970), capitalist relations of production include the market mediation of many capitals, as the capitalists controlling them compete for shares of surplus value. This is an anarchic process—unplanned and driven simply by the pursuit of profit by investors. At the same time, within each capitalist enterprise capital exercises despotic rule over segments of the working class, keeping the costs of production as low as possible by constraining wages, refusing reductions in the length of the working day, speeding-up production, introducing labor-saving technologies and externalizing whatever costs can be deflected. Capitalist relations of production consist of the dialectical combination of *despotism within firms* and *market-mediated anarchy among them*. Eco-socialism, in contrast, calls for democratic planning, both within production sites and in the wider economy.

As we have seen, reliance on market mechanisms, as in climate capitalism, is an ineffective means of making radical changes in our socio-ecological relations within the tight timespan now left. Based on her analysis of “cannibal capitalism,” Nancy Fraser (2022: 155–6) offers a “simple formula” for conceptualizing the roles of markets in a socialist society: “no markets at the top, no markets at the bottom, but possibly some markets in the in-between.” At the top, the social surplus, which shapes our collective future, “must be allocated via collective processes of democratic planning in which market mechanisms should have no place” (Fraser 2022: 155–6). This directly addresses capital’s systemic power. At “the bottom,” our basic subsistence (shelter, clothing, food,

health care, education, transportation, communication, energy, leisure, clean water, and breathable air) should take the form of public goods.

Planning should be seen as “the negation of the anarchy of production” (Chen 2023: 169). In ecological planning, “society—based on scientific evidence and public debate—democratically decides how to organize the process of social provisioning and how to avoid transgressing planetary boundaries” (Schmelzer and Hofferberth 2023: 143). Eco-socialist planning extends the planning that already takes place within capitalist enterprises, while transforming it from a top-down expression of oligarchic power-over to a democratic form of power-with. In our current setting of looming climate catastrophe, two priorities stand out: first, the need to make planning as participatory as possible, avoiding the replication of top-down, bureaucratic practices; and second, the need for “globally coordinated planning” (Schmelzer and Hofferberth 2023: 151) that moves beyond the legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

Alongside eco-socialist disaster response, in addressing the climate crisis proactively, globally coordinated planning will need to follow the formula of “contraction and convergence” (Maslin, Lang, and Harvey 2023: 2), the idea that “every country must reduce its emissions and that all countries must converge on net zero emissions” (Maslin, et al. 2023: 2). In convergence, the advanced capitalist countries (responsible historically for most carbon pollution) reduce emissions at a much faster rate than global South countries (some of which may increase emissions in the short term). Such an approach is crucial in transcending the “exploitative colonial and post-colonial relationships, processes, and institutional structures” (Ciplet 2023: 2) of eco-imperialism, “redistributing wealth and access to technologies, and making global and local consumption patterns more equitable” (Ciplet 2023: 2)—moving us toward “a good life for all within planetary boundaries” (O’Neill, et al. 2018).

Forming an Eco-Socialist Historical Bloc

To transform the forces and relations of production, to shift from the anarchy of capitalism to a democratic, planned economy, requires collective agency and the formation of an historical bloc. Who are the agents, what are the practices and organizational forms for this? These are questions for *hegemonic struggle*.

In the conduct of such struggle, three issues dominate. First, there is the question of the *social forces* that can be brought into the bloc—those with an interest in ending fossil capitalism. Second, there is the question of which *practices* can most effectively produce transformative changes to disempower capital and capitalists while effectively addressing the ecological crisis. Third, there is the question of *organizational form*: how can the collective protagonism opposing capitalism and seeking a just and liveable world form an effective “political instrument” for transformative change?

Social Forces for an Eco-Socialist Transformation

On the first question, the pivotal social force in the struggle for socialism is the proletariat. Its power is uniquely rooted in three conditions. First, it comprises a super-majority; hence majoritarian (i.e., democratic) climate action must create a working-class coalition. Second, its “strategic location at the point of production” affords it “structural power over the source of capital’s profits and social reproduction³ more generally” (Huber 2022: 6). Finally, since “economic insecurity defines working-class life,” proletarians have “a fundamental material *interest*” (Huber 2022: 6, italics in original) in transforming relations of production. Yet, as John Bellamy Foster has observed in conversation with Jia Keqing, “what is involved in class struggle today is not simply struggles in the workplace...” (Foster and Keqing 2013: 41). Foster, who introduced the concept of “environmental proletariat” in 2010 (Foster 2010), goes on to remark that, particularly in the global South, economic and ecological problems “are more and more intertwined given the structural crisis of capital and combined economic and ecological crisis and catastrophe” (Foster and Keqing 2013: 41).

In the environmental proletariat, the politics of production and of socio-ecological reproduction are conjoined. As fossil capitalism has opened a widening metabolic rift, social forces opposing capital’s domination of labor are aligning with forces opposing capital’s domination of nonhuman nature. The close articulation of capitalist domination over labor with capitalist-driven degradation of the ecosystems that enable social reproduction is facilitating diverse alliances of movements.

GND, Degrowth, and *Buen Vivir* each contain elements of the environmental proletariat that are potentially inclined toward eco-socialism. The challenge lies in pulling these into a coherent project with a mass base. David Ciptet (2022) has addressed the conditions under which Just Transition coalitions can facilitate the formation of such a counter-hegemonic historical bloc. To transform political-economic structures, “advocates must strategically contend with ‘multi-dimensional nodes of power’” (Ciptet 2022: 320) in civil society, political society, and economic society, and their relation to a just transition. Observing that typically, “transition coalitions are either impeded by their inability to gain strategic forms of power, or disembedded from the concerns and leadership of directly impacted communities” (Ciptet 2022: 327), he emphasizes the need to build “transformative coalitions” in which “diverse counter-hegemonic forces gain significant strategic power” (Ciptet 2022: 327), while simultaneously embedding themselves “in the concerns, leadership, and decision making of directly impacted peoples” (Ciptet 2022: 327).

Indigenous communities, dispossessed from traditional lands by colonialism and imperialism, are an important part of the environmental proletariat. *Buen Vivir*, of course, is a highly embedded form of political agency, grounded in Indigenous lifeways and resistance to eco-imperialism, but to gain strategic power in civil, political and economic society the Indigenous current needs to

³ By social reproduction, Fraser (2022: 9) means “the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human beings and social bonds.”

flow together with other movements that share a vision of decolonization, decommodification and decarbonization—the “three ds,” as Eaton (2021) has characterized them.

Degrowth, as Schoppek (2020) notes, contains a “sufficiency-oriented” strand, emphasizing individual responsibility, which resonates with neoliberal “responsibilization,” but also a “practical left” strand that takes up an environmental-proletarian standpoint, advocating a re-embedded, solidarity-based economy. The former strand exemplifies “subhegemony”: appearing to be counter-hegemonic yet containing elements of hegemony that can have a “flanking effect” that helps solidify hegemonic power by deflecting attention from the need for structural transformation. In sufficiency-oriented degrowth movements, the emphasis on self-care, food-sharing and the like actually supports neoliberal hegemony by ignoring structural factors and atomizing individuals (Schoppek 2020). The same may be said of GND/Just Transition coalitions that are in tune with struggles on the ground but lack the forms of strategic power in the state, economy, and civil society, necessary to translate their proposals into truly transformative change.

Clearly, there is a diverse array of social forces for whom a transition to eco-socialism would be enormously beneficial. The environmental proletariat comprises most of humanity, and aligned movements for climate and social justice can amplify its presence while extending the political agenda to issues of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other concerns that are integral to socialism. Yet the alignment is not yet organized in a politically impactful form—a unity-in-diversity. Moreover, as the example of subhegemonic flanking within Degrowth shows, the dominant hegemony continues to persuade, often deflecting us from the steps we need to take collectively to avert ecocide and pushing us toward practices that actually bolster the status quo.

Non-Reformist Reforms and War of Position

This discussion takes us to the second question in building an alternative historical bloc: which *practices* can most effectively produce transformative changes—in the current conjuncture and longer term—to disempower capital and capitalists while effectively addressing the ecological crisis? Since publication of Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* (2014) the concept of “Blockadia” has caught on among climate justice activists. Resistance to carbon extraction, although an important aspect of climate-justice politics, cannot take us beyond fossil capitalism. “Resistance is fertile” is a popular anarchist slogan, but new growth requires more than fertilization. Anarchism (including anarchist currents within Degrowth and *Buen Vivir* and direct-action groups like Extinction Rebellion) conceptualizes new growth as prefigurative politics—living differently in the here-and-now, by establishing local, non-hierarchical, and communal practices in the interstices of late capitalism. However, this *retreatist* conception of prefiguration is narrow, and shallow. If the repertoire of movement practices is restricted to direct-action resistance and local, grassroots prefiguration, the prospects of building a transformative historical bloc are quite slim. This approach reifies the state as a fixture impervious to transformation whose in-built authoritarianism can only be resisted, while reducing prefiguration to what can be accomplished in the here-and-now (De Smet 2014).

Yet addressing the state rather than retreating from it carries its own risks. To avoid co-optation, counter-hegemonic practice needs to push for *non-reformist reforms*, and to link these together in a multi-scalar and multi-frontal war of position (Carroll 2021a). Rather than functioning to maintain the system, non-reformist reforms “create the conditions for deeper transformations” (Belliveau, Rowe, and Dempsey 2021: 457). Andres Gorz (1967) introduced the concept of non-reformist reform in *Strategy for Labour*. In non-reformist reform, what is key is to open space for greater democracy; hence, the method of reform needs to challenge “the alienation of most people from control over their economic lives,” as Arthur McEwen (1999: 18) has argued. “Democratic initiatives, nonreformist reforms, cannot simply be for the people; they need to be of the people and by the people as well.”

Non-reformist reforms gain impact as they are bundled within a larger transformative project, proliferating an alternative social logic. Energy Democracy presents an example.⁴ Grounded in struggles for a just energy transition in Europe (Szulecki 2018, italics in original), energy democracy’s three overarching goals—“*resisting* the fossil-fuel-dominant energy agenda while *reclaiming* and democratically *restructuring* energy regimes”—inform a bundle of practices that include divestment initiatives, anti-fracking protests, Indigenous activism, community solar projects, and so on (Burke and Stephens 2017). When framed in simple localist terms, energy democracy fails to connect the dots between particular communities striving for energy democracy (typically in the North) and extractive capitalism (Droubi, Heffron, and McCauley 2022), yet its uptake by many progressives, particularly through Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED),⁵ deepens the just-transition project.

Energy Democracy is a bundle of non-reformist reforms that can be nested within a wider war of position to shift the correlation of political, economic, and cultural forces by building an historical bloc for eco-socialist revolution. Such positional warfare creates new practices and solidarities at different scales, while weakening the hegemonic bloc. The components of the war of position are sometimes presented as “transitional demands,” a practice pioneered by Marx and Engels ([1848] 2019) in *The Communist Manifesto*, which called, among other reforms, for “free education for all children in public schools.”

Creating a New Political Instrument for Eco-Socialist Transformation

The prospects for eco-socialist transformation seem slim in our immediate situation. Although green-left ideas are “scattered about, here and there...one looks in vain for a viable ecosocialist politics. As political stakes mount, prospects for revolutionary change recede” (Boggs 2021: 137). To build transformational coalitions to shift power through the conduct of a war of position—to sustain the transformation from fossil capitalism to eco-socialism—a political instrument capable of mobilizing power from below, challenging power on the intersecting terrains of state, economy,

⁴ See also Goodman and Morton’s (2023) discussion of climate democracy.

⁵ See the TUED website <https://www.tuedglobal.org/>, and see Sweeney (2023) for an example of TUED policy research, in this paper calling for a *left* Global Green New Deal that features public ownership of the power sector.

and civil society, and building the bases for post-capitalist alternatives is indispensable. Gramsci (1971) called this instrument the Modern Prince. Such a formation entails much more than militant, episodic resistance, and requires direct, ongoing engagement with capital, the state and civil society. In Gramsci's (1971: 129) conception, the Modern Prince cannot be a concrete individual (as in Machiavelli's Prince) but must be "a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form." The Modern Prince is a revolutionary party that builds, sustains and focuses that collective will on the strategic aim to found "a new type of state" (Gramsci 1971: 147), "a socialist state, tending to 'the reabsorption of political society into civil society'" (Gramsci 1971: 253; quoted in Chrysis 2024: 226). In this war of position, civil society and its ideological institutions form a crucial battleground.

The Modern Prince must be a school of popular protagonism, building people's capacities to analyze and act, and combatting the tendency for subalterns to consent spontaneously to their subordination. This means "a focus upon the human product of revolutionary practice" (Lebowitz 2020: 164), namely the "self-changing" that occurs as people change their own circumstances (Marx [1845] 2002, thesis III). As people organize and act collectively, changing their setting, they change themselves, becoming rich in capacities to cooperate and collaborate in satisfying each other's needs; not simply to subsist but to thrive. Importantly, in building capacity for a democratic way of life, "the revolutionary political instrument requires a horizontal relationship between the political instrument and the social movements" (Lebowitz 2020: 172).

In the spaces created by the political instrument, different political strands can be braided, synthesizing the insights and vitality from Degrowth, *Buen Vivir*, and GND initiatives with those from feminist, anti-racist, and other social justice movements. A party that builds protagonism rather than simply contesting elections (as with liberal- and social-democratic parties) *prefigures* a democratic-socialist state. It creates a counter-hegemonic historical bloc, capable of wresting the existing state from capital, while birthing a new state through participatory-democratic institutions such as workers' and communal councils (Lebowitz 2020).

The struggle for hegemony is multi-scalar. Political parties typically organize at national and sub-national levels. However, "in a globalized world, state apparatuses, national and transnational civil societies, and institutions of the global governance regime *simultaneously* become strategic places, spaces and scales in/of hegemonic struggle" (Muhr 2024: 420). Given the "coloniality of global power," Thomas Muhr (2024: 407) goes on to foreground the prospects for "a counter-hegemonic historical bloc as a *Global South bloc*"—aligning progressive states and movements within just political-economic arrangements, as in the ALBA-TCP alliance, articulating "state-led internationalism" with "movements-based transnationalism" (Muhr 2024: 407), via the ALBA Movements Political Coordination. Although the World Social Forum (WSF), formed in 2001 as a counter-hegemonic alternative to the World Economic Forum, has not managed to develop from a discussion space to a political instrument with agentic capacity, the Progressive International, launched in 2020, has an explicit action orientation. Its commitment to coordinated, revolutionary

action reflects the advance of the “global Left” in the two decades following the emergence of the WSF.

As Muhr’s (2024) analysis implies, that global left extends beyond movements and parties aspiring to transform capitalism, to include progressive regimes constructing society-wide alternatives. A transnational historical bloc for eco-socialism will need to build on the capacities already in place, in emerging formations that open space for alternatives to Atlanticist imperialism (e.g., ALBA, BRICS+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and in particular, in the world’s largest socialist regime.

Space does not permit a review of the important developments in China since 2007, when the Communist Party of China officially adopted a program for building an “Ecological Civilization,” later written into China’s Constitution in 2018. In China, Ecological Civilization is framed as a form of ecological modernization that develops “new quality productive forces” (Patel 2024) attuned to the “Harmonious Coexistence of Mankind and Nature” (Pan 2021), combined with an aesthetic initiative to build a “Beautiful China” (Pan 2021). Operating within a logic different from both the self-expansion of capital and the purely technocratic understanding of productive forces that came to dominate twentieth century socialism, this initiative merits careful study, and support. Schwartzman and Schwartzman (2024) address China’s prospects for leading a transition to global ecological civilization supported by renewable energy technologies, including Concentrated Solar Power and direct air capture. As part of the Belt and Road initiative,

China could build solar power in the Arabian and Sahara Deserts to supply electricity to the whole region and Africa, while powering the direct air capture (DAC) of carbon dioxide and the permanent burial of carbon as carbonates in the crust of Oman. (Schwartzman and Schwartzman 2024: 811)

For this hopeful scenario to materialize “the enemy of humanity, namely militarized fossil capital and its political instruments, must be defeated by a transnational movement driven by a very broad coalition” Schwartzman and Schwartzman 2024: 816), to build “a new global regime of cooperation and peace” (Schwartzman and Schwartzman 2024: 817; cf Schwartzman 2025).⁶

This article has focused on capitalism and climate crisis. Refusing ecocide is the most pressing existential issue of our time. But as the WSF and Progressive International intimate, a host of movements and political currents are integral to creating a just and liveable world for all. Besides the proletariat, with its base in capitalist relations of production, the key ones, as Nancy Fraser (2022: 17) argues, revolve around “social reproduction, the earth’s ecology, political power, and ongoing infusions of wealth expropriated from racialized peoples.” Building an historical bloc around a vast and diverse environmental proletariat means integrating “other emancipatory

⁶ For recent discussions of China’s Ecological Civilization initiative see Xu and colleagues (2023) and Chen (2025). A book of essays on Ecological Civilization including writings by Xi Jinping has recently been published in China, with the request to Party committees of different levels “to not only systematically study the book, but also think deeply and integrate theory with practice” (Liqiang 2022). See also Pan (2021).

currents” (Fraser 2022: 17)—feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist—which furnish the “background conditions” (Fraser 2022: 17) for capitalist production itself. A broad historical bloc portends an eco-socialism committed to gender and racial justice and decolonization. Through the combination of militant movement politics and party-centered politics, articulating “movements-based transnationalism” with “state-led internationalism” (Muhr 2024: 407), eco-socialist practice can be extended throughout state, civil society and economy.

Building that bloc while pursuing tactical struggles day-to-day in the ongoing war of position is our best bet in refusing ecocide. The transformation must be twofold—combining non-reformist reforms with system transformation, so that “any initially restricted partial reforms and steps taken to overcome the capitalist system as a whole occur simultaneously” (Klein 2024: 66). A capacious eco-socialist project directly confronts the trifecta of power that is at the heart of ecocide and social injustice. It offers a just economic alternative to capitalism, capable of addressing the climate emergency. It provides an alternative hegemonic project capable of unifying a post-capitalist historical bloc. It challenges the geopolitical economy of ecological imperialism and opens toward a world order organized for cooperation, solidarity, and peace. Our current trajectory is perilous, but there is still time to correct course.

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