

ECOSOCI ALISM



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Ecosocialism

A Radical Alternative
to Capitalist Catastrophe

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CHAPTER TWO

Ecosocialism and Democratic Planning

If capitalism can't be reformed to subordinate profit to human survival, what alternative is there but to move to some sort of nationally and globally planned economy? Problems like climate change require the "visible hand" of direct planning. . . . Our capitalist corporate leaders can't help themselves, have no choice but to systematically make wrong, irrational, and ultimately—given the technology they command—globally suicidal decisions about the economy and the environment. So then, what other choice do we have than to consider a true ecosocialist alternative?

—Richard Smith²

Ecosocialism is an attempt to provide a radical civilizational alternative to what Marx called capitalism's "destructive progress."³ It advances an

economic policy founded on the nonmonetary and extraeconomic criteria of social needs and ecological equilibrium. Grounded on the basic arguments of the ecological movement and of the Marxist critique of political economy, this dialectical synthesis—attempted by a broad spectrum of authors, from André Gorz (in his early writings) to Elmar Altvater, James O'Connor, Joel Kovel, and John Bellamy Foster—is at the same time a critique of “market ecology,” which does not challenge the capitalist system, and of “productivist socialism,” which ignores the issue of natural limits.

According to O'Connor, the aim of ecological socialism is a new society based on ecological rationality, democratic control, social equality, and the predominance of use value over exchange value.⁴ I would add that these aims require: (a) collective ownership of the means of production (“collective” here meaning public, cooperative, or communitarian property); (b) democratic planning, which makes it possible for society to define the goals of investment and production, and (c) a new technological structure of the productive forces. In other words, a revolutionary social and economic transformation.⁵

For ecosocialists, the problem with the main currents of political ecology, represented by most green parties, is that they do not seem to take into account the intrinsic contradiction between the capitalist dynamics of the unlimited expansion of capital and accumulation of profits and the preservation of the environment. This leads to a critique of productivism, which is often relevant but does not lead beyond an ecologically reformed “market economy.” The result has been that many green parties have become the ecological alibi of center-left social-liberal governments.⁶

On the other hand, the problem with the dominant trends of the left during the twentieth century—social democracy and the Soviet-

inspired Communist movement—is their acceptance of the actually existing pattern of productive forces. While the former limited themselves to a reformed—at best Keynesian—version of the capitalist system, the latter developed an authoritarian collectivist—or state capitalist—form of productivism. In both cases, environmental issues remained out of sight or were at least marginalized.

Marx and Engels themselves were not unaware of the environmentally destructive consequences of the capitalist mode of production; there are several passages in *Capital* and other writings that point to this understanding.⁷ Moreover, they believed that the aim of socialism is not to produce more and more commodities, but to give human beings free time to fully develop their potentialities. To this extent they have little in common with “productivism,” i.e., with the idea that the unlimited expansion of production is an aim in itself.

However, the passages in their writings to the effect that socialism will permit the development of productive forces beyond the limits imposed on them by the capitalist system imply that socialist transformation concerns only the capitalist relations of production, which have become an obstacle (“chains” is the term often used) to the free development of the existing productive forces. Socialism would mean above all the social appropriation of these productive capacities, putting them at the service of the workers. To quote a passage from *Anti-Dühring*, a canonical work for many generations of Marxists, under socialism “society takes possession openly and without detours of the productive forces that have become too large” for the existing system.⁸

The experience of the Soviet Union illustrates the problems that result from such a collectivist appropriation of the capitalist productive apparatus. From the beginning, the thesis of the socialization of

the existing productive forces predominated. It is true that during the first years after the October Revolution an ecological current was able to develop, and the Soviet authorities took certain limited environmental protection measures. But with the process of Stalinist bureaucratization, productivist methods both in industry and agriculture were imposed by totalitarian means while ecologists were marginalized or eliminated. The catastrophe of Chernobyl was the ultimate example of the disastrous consequences of this imitation of Western productive technologies. A change in the forms of property that is not followed by democratic management and a reorganization of the productive system can only lead to a dead end.

A critique of the productivist ideology of “progress” and of the idea of a “socialist” exploitation of nature had appeared already in the writings of some dissident Marxists of the 1930s, such as Walter Benjamin. But it is mainly during the last few decades that ecosocialism has developed as a challenge to the thesis of the neutrality of productive forces, which predominated in the main tendencies of the left during the twentieth century.

Ecosocialists should take their inspiration from Marx’s remarks on the Paris Commune: Workers cannot take possession of the capitalist state apparatus and put it to work at their service. They have to “break it” and replace it with a radically different, democratic, and nonstatist form of political power. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the productive apparatus, which is not “neutral” but carries in its structure the imprint of its development at the service of capital accumulation and the unlimited expansion of the market. This puts it in contradiction with the needs of environmental protection and with the health of the population. One must therefore “revolutionize” it in a process of radical transformation.

Of course many scientific and technological achievements of modernity are precious, but the whole productive system must be transformed, and this can be done only by ecosocialist methods: i.e., through a democratic planning of the economy that takes into account the preservation of the ecological equilibrium. This may mean discontinuing certain branches of production: for instance, nuclear plants, certain methods of mass/industrial fishing (which are responsible for the near-extirmination of several species in the seas), the destructive logging of tropical forests, etc.—the list is very long. It first of all requires, however, a revolution in the energy system, with the replacement of the present sources (essentially fossil) that are responsible for the pollution and poisoning of the environment with renewable sources of energy: water, wind, sun. The issue of energy is decisive because fossil energy (oil, coal) is responsible for much of the planet's pollution as well as for the disastrous climate change. Nuclear energy is a false alternative not only because of the danger of new Chernobyls, but also because nobody knows what to do with the thousands of tons of radioactive waste—toxic for hundreds, thousands, and in some cases millions of years—and the gigantic carcasses of contaminated obsolete plants. Solar energy, which has never aroused much interest in capitalist societies (not being “profitable” or “competitive”), must become the object of intensive research and development and play a key role in the building of an alternative energy system.

All this must be accomplished under the necessary condition of full and equitable employment. This condition is essential not only to meet the requirement of social justice, but in order to ensure working-class support for the process of structurally transforming the productive forces. This process is impossible without public control over

the means of production and over planning—that is, public decisions on investment and technological change, which must be taken away from the banks and capitalist enterprises in order to serve society’s common good.

But putting these decisions into the hands of workers is not enough. In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx defined socialism as a society where “the associated producers rationally organize their exchange (*Stoffwechsel*) with nature.” But in volume 1 of *Capital* there is a broader approach: socialism is conceived as “an association of free human beings (*Menschen*), which works with common (*gemeinschaftlichen*) means of production.”⁹ This is a much more appropriate conception: the rational organization of production and consumption has to be the work not only of the “producers,” but also of the consumers, in fact of the whole society, with its productive and “nonproductive” population, which includes students, youth, housewives (and househusbands), pensioners, and so on.

The whole society in this sense will be able to choose, democratically, which productive lines are to be privileged and how many resources are to be invested in education, health, or culture.¹⁰ The prices of goods themselves would not be left to the laws of supply and demand but determined as far as possible according to social, political, and ecological criteria. Initially, this might only involve taxes on certain products and subsidized prices for others, but ideally, as the transition to socialism moves forward, more and more products and services would be distributed free of charge according to the will of the citizens.

Far from being “despotic” in itself, democratic planning is the exercise by a whole society of its freedom of decision. This is what is required for liberation from the alienating and reified “economic

laws” and “iron cages” of capitalist and bureaucratic structures. Democratic planning combined with the reduction of labor time would be a decisive step of humanity toward what Marx called “the kingdom of freedom.” This is because a significant increase in free time is in fact a condition for working people’s participation in the democratic discussion and management of the economy and society.

Partisans of the free market point to the failure of Soviet planning as a reason to reject, out of hand, any idea of an organized economy. Without entering the discussion on the achievements and miseries of the Soviet experience, it was obviously a form of dictatorship over needs, to use the expression of György Márkus and his friends in the Budapest School: a nondemocratic and authoritarian system that gave a monopoly over all decisions to a small oligarchy of techno-bureaucrats. It was not planning itself that led to dictatorship, but the growing limitations on democracy in the Soviet state and, after Lenin’s death, the establishment of a totalitarian bureaucratic power, which led to an increasingly undemocratic and authoritarian system of planning. If socialism is defined as control by the workers and the population in general over the process of production, the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors was a far cry from it.

The failure of the USSR illustrates the limits and contradictions of bureaucratic planning, which is inevitably inefficient and arbitrary: it cannot be used as an argument against democratic planning.¹¹ The socialist conception of planning is nothing other than the radical democratization of economy: If political decisions are not to be left to a small elite of rulers, why should not the same principle apply to economic decisions? The issue of the specific balance to be struck between planning and market mechanisms is admittedly a difficult one: during the first stages of a new society markets will certainly retain

an important place, but as the transition to socialism advances planning will become more and more predominant, as against the laws of exchange value.¹²

Engels insisted that a socialist society “will have to establish a plan of production taking into account the means of production, specially including the labour force. It will be, in last instance, the useful effects of various use-objects, compared between themselves and in relation to the quantity of labour necessary for their production, that will determine the plan.”¹³ In capitalism, use value is only a means—often a trick—at the service of exchange value and profit (which explains, by the way, why so many products in the present-day society are substantially useless). In a planned socialist economy use value is the only criterion for the production of goods and services, with far-reaching economic, social, and ecological consequences. As Joel Kovel has observed: “The enhancement of use-values and the corresponding restructuring of needs becomes now the social regulator of technology rather than, as under capital, the conversion of time into surplus value and money.”¹⁴

In the type of democratic planning system envisaged here, the plan concerns the main economic options, not the administration of local restaurants, groceries and bakeries, small shops, and artisan enterprises or services. It is important to emphasize, as well, that planning is not in contradiction with workers’ self-management of their productive units. While the decision, made through the planning system, to transform, say, an auto plant into one producing buses and trams would be made by society as a whole, the internal organization and functioning of the plant should be democratically managed by its own workers. There has been much discussion of the “centralized” or “decentralized” character of planning, but it could

be argued that the real issue is democratic control of the plan at all levels: local, regional, national, continental, and, hopefully, international, since ecological issues such as global warming are planetary and can be dealt with only on a global scale. One could call this proposition global democratic planning. Even at this level, it would be quite the opposite of what is usually described as “central planning,” since the economic and social decisions are not made by any “center” but democratically decided by the populations concerned.

Of course, there will inevitably be tensions and contradictions between self-managed establishments or local democratic administrations and broader social groups. Negotiation mechanisms can help to solve many such conflicts, but ultimately the broadest groups of those concerned, if they are the majority, have the right to impose their views. To give an example: a self-administered factory decides to evacuate its toxic waste into a river. The population of a whole region is in danger of being polluted: it can therefore, after a democratic debate, decide that production in this unit must be discontinued until a satisfactory solution is found to control its waste. Hopefully, in an ecosocialist society, the factory workers themselves will have enough ecological consciousness to avoid making decisions that are dangerous to the environment and the health of the local population. But instituting means of ensuring that the broadest social interests have the decisive say, as the above example suggests, does not mean that issues concerning internal management are not to be vested at the level of the factory, school, neighborhood, hospital, or town.

Socialist planning must be grounded on a democratic and pluralist debate at all the levels where decisions are to be made. As organized in the form of parties, platforms, or any other political

movements, delegates to planning bodies must be elected and different propositions submitted to all the people concerned with them. That is, representative democracy must be completed, and corrected, by direct democracy, where people directly choose—at the local, national, and later global level—between major options. Should public transportation be free? Should the owners of private cars pay special taxes to subsidize public transportation? Should solar energy be subsidized, in order to compete with fossil energy? Should the work week be reduced to thirty or twenty hours, or fewer, even if this means reducing production? The democratic nature of planning is not incompatible with the existence of experts: their role is not to decide but to present their views—often different, if not opposite—to the democratic process of decision making. As Ernest Mandel put it: “Governments, parties, planning boards, scientists, technocrats or whoever can make suggestions, put forward proposals, try to influence people. . . . But under a multi-party system, such proposals will never be unanimous: people will have the choice between coherent alternatives. And the right and power to decide should be in the hands of the majority of producers/consumers/citizens, not of anybody else. What is paternalistic or despotic about that?”¹⁵

What guarantee is there that the people will make the right ecological choices, even at the price of giving up some of their habits of consumption? There is no such “guarantee,” other than the reasonable expectation that the rationality of democratic decisions will prevail once the power of commodity fetishism is broken. Of course, errors will be committed by popular choices, but who believes that experts make no errors themselves? One cannot imagine the establishment of such a new society without the majority of the population having achieved, by their struggles, their self-education, and

their social experience, a high level of socialist/ecological consciousness, and this makes it reasonable to suppose that serious errors—including decisions which are inconsistent with environmental needs—will be corrected.¹⁶ In any case, are not the alternatives—the blind market, or an ecological dictatorship of “experts”—much more dangerous than the democratic process, with all its limitations?

It is true that planning requires the existence of executive/technical bodies in charge of putting into practice what has been decided, but they are not necessarily authoritarian if they are under permanent democratic control from below and include workers’ self-management in a process of democratic administration. Of course, one cannot expect the majority of the people to spend all their free time in self-management or participatory meetings; as Ernest Mandel remarked, “Self-administration does not entail the disappearance of delegation. It combines decision-making by the citizens with stricter control of delegates by their respective electorate.”¹⁷

Michael Albert’s “participatory economy” (parecon) has been the object of some debate in the global justice movement. Although there are some serious shortcomings in his overall approach, which seems to ignore ecology and counterposes parecon to “socialism” as understood in the bureaucratic/centralized Soviet model, nevertheless parecon has some common features with the kind of ecosocialist planning proposed here: opposition to the capitalist market and to bureaucratic planning; a reliance on workers’ self-organization; antiauthoritarianism. Albert’s model of participatory planning is based on a complex institutional construction:

The participants in participatory planning are the workers’ councils and federations, the consumers’ councils and federations, and various Iteration Facilitation Boards (IFBs). Conceptually, the

planning procedure is quite simple. An IFB announces what we call “indicative prices” for all goods, resources, categories of labour, and capital. Consumers’ councils and federations respond with consumption proposals taking the indicative prices of final goods and services as estimates of the social cost of providing them. Workers’ councils and federations respond with production proposals listing the outputs they would make available and the inputs they would need to produce them, again, taking the indicative prices as estimates of the social benefits of outputs and true opportunity costs of inputs. An IFB then calculates the excess demand or supply for each good and adjusts the indicative price for the good up, or down, in light of the excess demand or supply, and in accord with socially agreed algorithms. Using the new indicative prices, consumers’ and workers’ councils and federations revise and resubmit their proposals. . . . In place of rule over workers by capitalists or by coordinators, *parecon* is an economy in which workers and consumers together cooperatively determine their economic options and benefit from them in ways fostering equity, solidarity, diversity, and self-management.¹⁸

The main problem with this conception—which, by the way, is not “quite simple” but extremely elaborate and sometimes quite obscure—is that it seems to reduce “planning” to a sort of negotiation between producers and consumers on the issue of prices, inputs and outputs, supply and demand. For instance, the branch workers’ council of the automobile industry would meet with the council of consumers to discuss prices and to adapt supply to demand. What this leaves out is precisely what constitutes the main issue in ecosocialist planning: a reorganization of the transport system, radically reducing the place of the private car. Since ecosocialism requires entire sectors of industry to disappear—nuclear plants, for instance—

and massive investment in small or almost nonexistent sectors (such as solar energy), how can this be dealt with by “cooperative negotiations” between the existing units of production and consumer councils on “inputs” and “indicative prices”? Albert’s model mirrors the existing technological and productive structure, and is too “economistic” to take into account the global, sociopolitical, and socioecological interests of the population—the interests of individuals, as citizens and as human beings, which cannot be reduced to their economic interests as producers and consumers. He leaves out not only the state as an institution—a respectable option—but also politics as the confrontation of different economic, social, political, ecological, cultural, and civilizational options, locally, nationally, and globally.

This is very important because the passage from capitalist “destructive progress” to socialism is a historical process, a permanent revolutionary transformation of society, culture, and mentalities—and politics, in the sense just defined, cannot but be central to this process. It is important to emphasize that such a process cannot begin without a revolutionary transformation of social and political structures, and the vast majority of the population’s active support of an ecosocialist program. The development of socialist consciousness and ecological awareness is a process in which the decisive factor is people’s own collective experience of struggle, moving from local and partial confrontations to the radical change of society.

Some ecologists believe that the only alternative to productivism is to stop growth altogether, or to replace it by negative growth—what the French call *décroissance*—and drastically reduce the population’s excessively high level of consumption by cutting energy expenditure

by half through renouncing individual family houses, central heating, and washing machines, and so on. Since these and similar measures of draconian austerity risk being quite unpopular, some of the advocates of *décroissance* play with the idea of a sort of “ecological dictatorship.”¹⁹ Against such pessimistic views, socialist optimists believe that technical progress and the use of renewable sources of energy will permit unlimited growth and abundance, so that all can receive “according to their needs.”

It seems to me that both these schools share a purely quantitative conception of “growth”—positive or negative—and of the development of productive forces. There is a third position, however, which seems to me more appropriate: a qualitative transformation of development. This means putting an end to capitalism’s monstrous waste of resources based on the large-scale production of useless and harmful products. The armaments industry is a good example, but a great part of the “goods” produced under capitalism—with their built-in obsolescence—have no other use but to generate profit for big corporations. The issue is not “excessive consumption” in the abstract, but the prevalent type of consumption, based as it is on conspicuous consumption, massive waste, mercantile alienation, obsessive accumulation of goods, and the compulsive acquisition of pseudo-novelty imposed by “fashion.” A new society would orient production toward satisfying authentic needs, beginning with those which could be described as “biblical”—water, food, clothing, housing—but including also basic services such as health, education, transportation, and culture.

Obviously, the countries of the global South, where these needs are very far from being satisfied, will need a much higher level of “development”—building railroads, hospitals, sewage systems, and

other infrastructures—than the advanced industrial ones. But there is no reason why this cannot be accomplished with a productive system that is environmentally friendly and based on renewable energies. These countries will need to produce large amounts of food to nourish their hungry populations, but this can be much better achieved—as the peasant movements organized worldwide in the Via Campesina network have been arguing for years—through peasant biological agriculture based on family units, cooperatives, or collectivist farms than through the destructive and antisocial methods of industrialized agribusiness, based on the intensive use of pesticides, chemicals, and GMOs. Instead of the present monstrous debt system and the imperialist exploitation of the resources of the South by the industrial/capitalist countries, there would be a flow of technical and economic help from the North to the South, without the need—as some puritan and ascetic ecologists seem to believe—for the population in Europe and North America to reduce their standard of living in absolute terms. Instead, they would only get rid of the obsessive consumption induced by the capitalist system of useless commodities that do not correspond to any real need, while redefining the meaning of standard of living to connote a way of life that is actually richer, while consuming less.

How to distinguish the authentic from artificial, false, and makeshift needs? The advertising industry—which induces needs through mental manipulation—has invaded all spheres of human life in modern capitalist societies: not only nourishment and clothing, but sports, culture, religion, and politics are shaped according to its rules. It has invaded our streets, mailboxes, TV screens, newspapers, and landscapes in a permanent, aggressive, and insidious

way, and it decisively contributes to habits of conspicuous and compulsive consumption. Moreover, it wastes an astronomic amount of oil, electricity, labor time, paper, chemicals, and other raw materials—all paid for by consumers—in a branch of “production” that is not only useless, from a human viewpoint, but directly opposed to real social needs. While advertising is an indispensable dimension of a capitalist market economy, it would have no place in a society in transition to socialism, where it would be replaced by information on goods and services provided by consumer associations. The criterion for distinguishing an authentic need from an artificial one would be its persistence after the suppression of advertising. Of course, for some time old habits of consumption would persist, and nobody has the right to tell the people what their needs are. Changing patterns of consumption is a historical process as well as an educational challenge.

Some commodities, such as the individual car, raise more complex problems. Private cars are a public nuisance, killing and maiming hundreds of thousands of people yearly on a world scale, polluting the air in large cities—with dire consequences for the health of children and older people—and significantly contributing to climate change. However, they fulfill real needs under the present-day conditions of capitalism. Local experiments in some European towns with ecologically minded administrations show that it is possible—and approved by the majority of the population—to progressively limit the role of the individual automobile in favor of buses and trams. In a process of transition to ecosocialism, where public transportation—above or underground—would be vastly extended and free of charge and where pedestrians would have protected lanes, the private car would play a much smaller role than in

bourgeois society, where it has become a fetish promoted by insistent and aggressive advertisement, a prestige symbol, an identity sign (in the United States, the driver's license is the recognized ID), and a focus of personal, social, and erotic life.²⁰ It will be much easier, in the transition to a new society, to drastically reduce the transportation of goods by trucks—responsible for terrible accidents and high levels of pollution—replacing them with rail transport or what the French call *ferroutage* (trucks transported in trains from one town to another): only the absurd logic of capitalist “competition” explains the dangerous growth of the trucking system.

Yes, the pessimists will answer, but individuals are moved by infinite aspirations and desires that have to be controlled, checked, contained, and if necessary repressed, and this may call for some limitations on democracy. But ecosocialism is based on a reasonable expectation, which Marx already held: the predominance, in a society without classes and liberated of capitalist alienation, of “being” over “having,” i.e., of free time for the personal accomplishment by cultural, sportive, playful, scientific, erotic, artistic, and political activities, rather than the desire for an infinite possession of products. Compulsive acquisitiveness is induced by the commodity fetishism inherent in the capitalist system, by the dominant ideology and by advertising: nothing proves that it is part of an “eternal human nature.” As Ernest Mandel emphasized, “The continual accumulation of more and more goods (with declining ‘marginal utility’) is by no means a universal and even predominant feature of human behavior. The development of talents and inclinations for their own sake; the protection of health and life; care for children; the development of rich social relations . . . all these become major motivations once basic material needs have been satisfied.”²¹

As we have insisted, this does not mean that conflicts will not arise, particularly during the transition process between the requirements of environmental protection and social needs, between ecological imperatives and the necessity of developing basic infrastructures, particularly in poor countries, and between popular consumer habits and the scarcity of resources. A classless society is not a society without contradictions and conflicts. These are inevitable: it will be the task of democratic planning, in an ecosocialist perspective liberated from the imperatives of capital and profit, to solve them through pluralist and open discussion, leading to society itself making decisions. Such a grassroots and participative democracy is the only way, not to avoid errors, but to permit the social collectivity to correct its own mistakes.

Is this a utopia? In its etymological sense—“something that exists nowhere”—certainly. But are not utopias (that is, visions of an alternative future), wish-images of a different society, a necessary feature of any movement that wants to challenge the established order? As Daniel Singer explained in his literary and political testament *Whose Millennium?*, in a powerful chapter entitled “Realistic Utopia,”

If the establishment now looks so solid, despite the circumstances, and if the labor movement or the broader left are so crippled, so paralyzed, it is because of the failure to offer a radical alternative. . . . The basic principle of the game is that you question neither the fundamentals of the argument nor the foundations of society. Only a global alternative, breaking with these rules of resignation and surrender, can give the movement of emancipation genuine scope.²²

The socialist and ecological utopia is only an objective possibil-

ity, not the inevitable result of the contradictions of capitalism or the “iron laws of history.” One cannot predict the future, except in conditional terms; what is predictable is that in the absence of an ecosocialist transformation, of a radical change in the civilizational paradigm, the logic of capitalism will lead to dramatic ecological disasters, threatening the health and the lives of millions of human beings and perhaps even the survival of our species.

To dream and to struggle for a green socialism, or, as some say, a solar communism, does not mean that one does not fight for concrete and urgent reforms. Without any illusions about a “clean capitalism,” one must try to win time and to impose on the powers that be some elementary changes: banning the HCFCs that are destroying the ozone layer, a general moratorium on genetically modified organisms, a drastic reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases, strict regulation of the fishing industry as well as of the use of pesticides and chemicals in agro-industrial production, taxing polluting cars, developing public transportation on a much greater scale, progressively replacing trucks with trains. These and similar issues are at the heart of the agenda of the global justice movement and the World Social Forums. This is an important new political development that has permitted, since Seattle in 1999, the convergence of social and environmental movements in a common struggle against the system.

These urgent ecosocial demands can lead to a process of radicalization, if such demands are not adapted so as to fit in with the requirements of “competitiveness.” According to the logic of what Marxists call “a transitional program,” each small victory, each partial advance, leads immediately to a higher demand, a more radical aim. Such struggles around concrete issues are important not only because

partial victories are welcome in themselves, but also because they contribute to raise ecological and socialist consciousness and promote activity and self-organization from below: both would be necessary and indeed decisive preconditions for a radical, that is, revolutionary, transformation of the world.

Local experiments such as car-free areas in several European towns, organic agricultural cooperatives launched by the Brazilian peasant movement (MST), or the participative budget in Porto Alegre and, for a few years, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul (under Workers' Party, or Partido dos Trabalhadores, governor Olívio Dutra), are limited but interesting examples of social/ecological change. By permitting local assemblies to decide budget priorities, Porto Alegre became—until the left lost the 2002 municipal election—perhaps the most attractive example of “planning from below,” in spite of its limitations.²³ It must be admitted, however, that even if some national governments have taken a few progressive measures, on the whole the experience of left-center or left-green coalitions in Europe or Latin America has been rather disappointing, remaining firmly inside the limits of a social-liberal policy of adaptation to capitalist globalization. There will be no radical transformation unless the forces committed to a radical socialist and ecological program become hegemonic, in the Gramscian sense of the word. In one sense, time is on our side as we work for change, because the global situation of the environment is becoming worse and worse and the threats are coming closer and closer. But on the other hand, time is running out, because in some years—no one can say how many—the damage may be irreversible. There is no reason for optimism: the entrenched ruling elites of the system are incredibly powerful and the forces of radical opposition are still

small. But they are the only hope that capitalism's "destructive progress" will be halted. Walter Benjamin defined revolutions as being not the locomotives of history, but humanity reaching for the train's emergency brakes before it falls into the abyss.²⁴

Notes

1. Editorial, “Let Them Eat Pollution,” *Economist* (February 8, 1992).
2. Richard Smith, “The Engine of Eco Collapse,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16(4) (2005): 35.
3. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1960), 529–30. For a remarkable analysis of the destructive logic of capital, see Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (New York: Zed Books, 2002).
4. James O’Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 278, 331.
5. John Bellamy Foster uses the concept of “ecological revolution,” but he argues that “a global ecological revolution worthy of the name can only occur as part of a larger social—and I would insist, socialist—revolution. Such a revolution . . . would demand, as Marx insisted, that the associated producers rationally regulate the human metabolic relation with nature. . . . It must take its inspiration from William Morris, one of the most original and ecological followers of Karl Marx, from Gandhi, and from other radical, revolutionary and materialist figures, including Marx himself, stretching as far back as Epicurus.” Foster, “Organizing Ecological Revolution,” *Monthly Review*, 57(5) (2005): 9–10.
6. For an ecosocialist critique of “actually existing ecopolitics”—green economics, deep ecology, bioregionalism, etc.—see Joel Kovel, *The*

- Enemy of Nature*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2007), chapter 7.
7. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
 8. Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Paris: Ed. Sociales, 1950), 318.
 9. Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 828, and vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 92. One can find similar problems in contemporary Marxism; for instance, Ernest Mandel argued for a “democratic-centralist planning under a national congress of workers’ councils made up in its large majority of real workers” (Ernest Mandel, “Economics of the Transition Period,” in *50 Years of World Revolution*, edited by Ernest Mandel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971), 286. In later writings, he refers rather to “producers/consumers.” I often quote from the writings of Ernest Mandel, because he is the most articulate socialist theoretician of democratic planning, but it should be said that until the late 1980s he did not include the ecological issue as a central aspect of his economic arguments.
 10. Ernest Mandel defined planning in the following terms: “An economy governed by a plan implies . . . that society’s relatively scarce resources are not apportioned blindly (‘behind the backs of the producer-consumer’) by the play of the law of value but that they are consciously allocated according to previously established priorities. In a transitional economy where socialist democracy prevails, the mass of the working people democratically determine this choice of priorities” (“Economics of the Transition Period,” 282).
 11. “From the point of view of the mass of workers, sacrifices imposed by bureaucratic arbitrariness are neither more nor less ‘acceptable’ than sacrifices imposed by the blind mechanisms of the market. These represent only two different forms of the same alienation” (*ibid.*, 285).
 12. In his remarkable recent book on socialism, the Argentinian Marxist economist Claudio Katz emphasized that democratic planning, supervised from below by the majority of the population, “is not identical with absolute centralisation, total statism, war communism or command economy. The transition requires the primacy of planning over the market, but not the suppression of the market variables. The com-

bination between both instances should be adapted to each situation and each country.’ However, ‘the aim of the socialist process is not to keep an unchanged equilibrium between the plan and the market, but to promote a progressive loss of the market positions” (*El porvenir del socialismo*, Buenos Aires: Herramienta/Imago Mundi, 2004, 47–48).

13. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 349.
14. Kovel, *Enemy of Nature*, 215.
15. Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money* (London: Verso, 1991), 209.
16. Mandel observed: “We do not believe that the ‘majority is always right.’ . . . Everybody does make mistakes. This will certainly be true of the majority of citizens, of the majority of the producers, and of the majority of the consumers alike. But there will be one basic difference between them and their predecessors. In any system of unequal power . . . those who make the wrong decisions about the allocation of resources are rarely those who pay for the consequences of their mistakes. . . . Provided there exists real political democracy, real cultural choice and information, it is hard to believe that the majority would prefer to see their woods die . . . or their hospitals understaffed, rather than rapidly to correct their mistaken allocations” (Ernest Mandel, “In Defense of Socialist Planning,” *New Left Review* 1/159, 1986, 31).
17. Mandel, *Power and Money*, 204.
18. Michael Albert, *Participatory Economics: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2003), 154.
19. For a selection of “negative growth” texts, see Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree, eds., *The Post-Development Reader* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1997), and Michel Bernard et al., eds., *Objectif Décroissance: vers une société harmonieuse* (Lyon: Éditions Parangon, 2004). The main French theorist of décroissance is Serge Latour, author of *La planète des naufragés, essai sur l’après-développement* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).
20. Ernest Mandel was skeptical of rapid changes in consumer habits, such as the private car: “If, in spite of every environmental and other argument, they [the producers and consumers] wanted to maintain the dominance of the private motor car and to continue polluting their

cities, that would be their right. Changes in long-standing consumer orientations are generally slow—there can be few who believe that workers in the United States would abandon their attachment to the automobile the day after a socialist revolution” (“In Defense of Socialist Planning,” 30). While Mandel is right in insisting that changes in consumption patterns are not to be imposed, he seriously underestimates the impact that a system of extensive and free-of-charge public transports would have, as well as the assent of the majority of the citizens—already existing today in several great European cities—for measures restricting automobile circulation.

21. Mandel, *Power and Money*, 206.
22. Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 259–60.
23. See S. Baierle, “The Porto Alegre Thermidor,” in *Socialist Register* 2003, edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 2003).
24. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1/3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 1232.
25. Patrick Le Lay, quoted in *L'Espresso*, July 9, 2004.
26. Chico Mendes, quoted by Ailton Krenak, coordinator of the União das Nações Indígenas (Union of Indigenous Nations) of Brazil. In *Chico Mendes* (São Paulo: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Xapuri, Central Unica dos Trabalhadores, 1989).
27. *Ibid.*
28. Chico Mendes, *Chico Mendes por ele mesmo* (Rio de Janeiro: FASE, 1989), 24.
29. Krenak, *Chico Mendes*, 21.
30. Mendes, *Chico Mendes*, 57.
31. Traven, B., *The White Rose* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1979).
32. Information in this section is extracted from a 2012 issue of the Peruvian journal *Lucha Indígena*, edited by the Peruvian indigenous leader and ecosocialist Hugo Blanco.
33. Achim Brunnengraber, “Crise de l’environnement ou crise de société? De l’économie politique du changement climatique” (Environmental

- Crisis or Social Crisis? The Political Economy of Climate Change), in *Globalisation et crise écologique. Une critique de l'économie politique par des écologistes allemands (Globalization and Ecological Crisis: A Critique of Political Economy by German Ecologists)*, edited by Ulrich Brand and Michael Löwy (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), 243–62.
34. Matthieu Le Quang, *Laissons le pétrole sous terre. L'initiative Yasuní ITT en Équateur* (Leave the Petroleum in the Ground: the Yasuní ITT Initiative in Ecuador) (Paris: Éditions Omniscience, 2012).
 35. World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, "People's Agreement of Cochabamba," adopted April 22, 2010, <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/24/peoples-agreement>.
 36. Denis Chartier and Nathalie Blanc, "Les développements durables de l'Amazonie" (Sustainable Development in the Amazon), in *Grands barrages et habitants. Les risques sociaux du développement (Large Dams and Populations: The Social Risks of Development)*, edited by N. Blanc and S. Bonin (Paris: Éditions QAUE, 2008), 169–89; A. Hall and S. Brandford, "Development, Dams and Dilma: The Saga of Belo Monte," *Critical Sociology* 38 (2012): 851–62.