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## Forget Eco-Modernism<sup>2</sup>

Recent years have seen renewed debate on climate strategy on the left. Here, Kai Heron responds to the arguments of the proponents of a left ecomodernism, and argues that it risks reactionary political consequences.

For some years now eco-socialist debate has been locked into orbit around two sharply contrasting perspectives: degrowth and left eco-modernism. The former, represented by Jason Hickel, Giorgos Kallis, Stefania Barca, and others, claims that the growth-based paradigm — capital's endless material and energetic throughputs, the use of gross domestic product (GDP) as the measure of a healthy society, and an ideology of progress determined in accordance with capital's priorities — is a barrier to a post-capitalist future.

To disentangle our collective reproduction from capital, radical versions of degrowth have called for reductions in material and energetic throughputs in the imperial core, ecological and climate reparations, technology transfers to support a global green transition, global developmental convergence, and reductions in personal consumption for heavy consumers. These features are combined with a call for the expansion of green industry and energy, common ownership of the means of production, reduced working weeks, and democratic planning.

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This vision for degrowth requires revolutionary transformation in how we live our lives. Rather than mediating the pursuit of human and non-human needs through the profit motive, degrowth focuses on the need for democratically planned production to directly deliver what everyone and everything needs to survive and flourish. All of this, degrowthers argue, is not just desirable but essential to provide a secure ecological niche for human and non-human life. As Kohei Saito puts it in *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth*, it's degrowth or barbarism.

Left eco-modernism on the other hand is usually represented by Matthew Huber, Leigh Phillips, and proponents of a growth-based Green New Deal such as Robert Pollin. For left eco-modernists — as opposed to reactionary eco-modernists, or capitalists — degrowth is both unnecessary and politically poisonous. It's unnecessary because technological advances in hydrogen fuel, carbon capture and storage, nuclear energy, and renewable energy systems means that a high-consumption lifestyle for all is possible providing capitalism is abolished and workers take control of the means of production. It's politically poisonous because, as Cale Brooks writes in *Damage Magazine*, degrowth is a 'politics of less' that cannot rally support among workers who are already struggling to make ends meet.

For left eco-modernists, the climate crisis is irresolvable under capitalism not because of 'growth' but because the law of value dictates investment decisions. If something isn't profitable, it isn't pursued. Under socialism, all kinds of technologies and ecological projects that are currently off the table would become possible. The high fixed-capital costs of nuclear power, for example, deters investment by private capital, but a workers' state freed from the profit motive could invest the time and labour needed to make mass nuclear energy a reality and drive down emissions.

The debate between degrowth and left eco-modernism has been instructive on several fronts. It raises important questions about the kind of technologies we would like to see in a socialist future: should or shouldn't we have nuclear power, for instan-

ce? For degrowth's proponents, nuclear presupposes a particular division of labour that may not be desirable in a post-capitalist future, requires large amounts of water for cooling which may place stress on limited reserves on a warming planet, and produces long-lasting nuclear waste. Yet for left eco-modernists the fact that it does not contribute to global heating means it is a 'clean' fuel source that should be considered in a wider energy mix.

Exchanges between left eco-modernists and degrowthers have also prompted questions about who might be the subject of revolutionary struggles to come. As Huber and Phillips say, a 'politics of less' is unlikely to win many proponents among the imperial core's working classes when standards of living are everywhere in decline. The degrowth response is that such a position doesn't propose a politics of less per se, but rather a qualitatively different form of life, a politics of *more* richness and diversity many of the proposals for which have broad scientific and popular support. The high consumption lifestyles of many workers in the core are also said to be impossible to rollout to global working class within socio-ecological limits and are based — at least in part — on the past and present exploitation of the Global South's lands, seas, and labour. Left eco-modernists reply by denying that value drains from the periphery to the core of the capitalist world system are significant and that non-trivial ecological limits necessitate reductions in material and energetic throughputs.

## **An exhausted debate on an exhausted earth**

The dialogue between degrowthers and left eco-modernists has clarified the political stakes of what it means to struggle for a green transition on an exhausted earth. It is evident that the differences between degrowth and left eco-modernism are real, substantive, and irreconcilable, that the two outlooks present distinct post-capitalist visions based on opposed analyses of the political subject that might secure a post-capitalist transition, how they might secure it, and upon what technological basis. But for all this, the debate has become increasingly unedifying.

Part of the problem is that the left eco-modernists have consistently misinterpreted degrowth as a homogenous political perspective and subsequently missed some of the intricacies and weaknesses of degrowth. Degrowth's proponents are united by the idea that 'growthism' or the 'growth-based paradigm' is a barrier to human and non-human flourishing, but beyond this there are many disagreements about how to bring about a more sustainable social system and what that system would look like. Proposals range from degrowth anarchism, to eco-socialist degrowth, to degrowth policy wonkery, and even degrowth business models. To treat these very different political horizons as one is to miss something important about the breadth of degrowth's influence and appeal across the political spectrum, but also its lack of innate political vision. Simply put, degrowth is not a politics, it's an umbrella term for a series of socio-ecological propositions that have been fused onto a diversity of political perspectives, resulting in very different ideas about what degrowth means.

One of the most promising fusions is the combination of degrowth with eco-socialism explored in the work of Michael Löwy, Kohei Saito, Gareth Dale, Stefania Barca, John Bellamy Foster, and others. Whereas many non-Marxist proponents of degrowth limit their critique of capitalism to merely a critique of 'growth' — a blunt weapon that conflates growth's numerous denotations — Marxist degrowth draws on the far sharper critical instruments of historical materialism including exploitation, surplus-value, commodity fetishism, dependency, and social reproduction. And while many non-Marxist proponents of degrowth have overlooked the importance of class struggle and the site of production to socio-ecological transformation, Marxist degrowthers emphasise the need for class struggle and transformations in what is produced, how, and by whom. On top of this, work by Jason Hickel, Mariano Féliz and others has drawn degrowth into proximity with anti-imperialist and Third World Marxist thought, potentially opening movements in the core to repertoires of struggle, avenues of action, and acts of solidarity with struggles from the Global South.

While disagreements inevitably persist among Marxist degrowthers, and while proponents tend to overstate the novelty of degrowth's contributions to international socialist thought, the fusion of degrowth and Marxism is arguably one of the most exciting intellectual developments on the imperial core's left.

Yet according to left eco-modernism, any engagement with degrowth marks a radical departure from Marxism and from the interests of the working-class. For Huber, insofar as degrowth has gained popularity, it is among the 'professional managerial class' whose 'contempt for the working (and consuming) masses' and whose psychological turmoil about their 'complicity in consumer society' finds its clearest expression in degrowth. For left eco-modernists, what's needed is a return to class politics of the 'classical Marxist' variety. 'There is no need to add any "eco-" prefix to Marxism to explain our predicament', Huber and Phillips argue, because 'classical Marxism's explanation and concomitant prescription for correction are already sufficient.'

This argument would be persuasive if left eco-modernism were offering an anti-imperialist and ecologically literate Marxist politics, but this is not the case. In their recent review of Kohei Saito's work, Huber and Phillips present their clearest summation of left eco-modernist politics so far and in the process demonstrate that the perspective is better described as a social chauvinist deviation from Marxism, a worrying reactionary tendency platformed by ostensibly left-wing outlets, that could have a damaging influence on trade union and social movement activity in the core.

There are at least three areas where Huber and Phillips' article reveals left eco-modernism's reactionary character: its rejection of the existence of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange, its vulgarized interpretation of Marx's analysis of capital, and its claim that left environmentalist recognition of socio-ecological limits is a brand of neo-Malthusianism. These political and theoretical commitments converge to support a narrowly nationalist, ecologically illiterate, vision of socialist transition which intentionally or not finds common ground with ascendent 'national conservative' thought in the US and elsewhere.

## Value transfers

One of left eco-modernism's defining features is a denial of the existence of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange from the periphery to the core of the world system. In their recent review, Huber and Phillips cite Charles Post's 2011 article *A Critique of the Theory of the 'Labour Aristocracy'* to claim that the idea of value transfers has been 'long discredited'. Yet Post's article is by no means a decisive critique of value transfers or uneven ecological exchange, and its conclusions are at the very least questionable. Zak Cope refuted Post's empirical and conceptual evidence more than a decade ago, while numerous works have since been published showing the past and present significance of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange, even as the material standard of living in the imperial core continues to decline.

It is also revealing that in their rebuttal of value transfers neither Huber and Phillips, nor Post, engage with Third World and anti-imperialist Marxist thought, which while by no means homogenous on this or any issue has compellingly shown the import of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange both historically and in the present day. Important overlooked references include Amiya Bagchi, Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik, Ali Kadri, Anouar Abdel-Malek, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Ruy Marini, Claudio Katz, and Intan Suwandi.

Value transfers and uneven ecological exchange have to be denied by left eco-modernism. To accept that workers in the core might benefit from the proceeds of capitalism's global division of labour — whether through wages, consumer goods, raw material transfers, infrastructure, health care, and so on — is for them to muddy the waters about working class interests in the core and working class entanglement within imperialist and neo-colonial systems of accumulation. In the left eco-modernist imaginary the worker must be a pure, abstract, exploited totem, a repository for their revolutionary hopes. In this imaginary — and it is an imaginary — the working class cannot be a global, complex, living and differentiated class of actually existing people. It is inconceivable

that though they are exploited themselves, through their differentiated integration into capital's circuits of accumulation, workers in the imperial core may also participate in the realization of value generated through the exploitation, domination, and even death, of workers elsewhere in the core and in the periphery. The working class, in other words, is internally differentiated along gendered, racial, and national lines, and the immediate interests of various sectors of the global working class can and do come into opposition with one another.

Grasping this is an important condition for international solidarity and the formation of ecological politics on the right terms. When workers in the imperial core consume foodstuffs produced through widespread drought-inducing deforestation, for example, or when they're employed to build weapons used to commit genocide on Palestinians, solidarity requires a degree of material 'sacrifice' on the part of workers in the imperial core. As Lenin once put it:

internationalism on the part of oppressors or 'great' nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question.

Making up for this inequality through acts of working class internationalist solidarity, and by aligning struggles in the core with those of workers in the periphery, creates the subjective and material conditions for a social revolution in which workers the world over can find their common interest in dismantling capital. As Marx argued, this is the only kind of revolution that can produce "world historical, empirically universal individuals" where there are otherwise only "local ones."

Through its denial of value transfers and under-theorisation of how imperialism is reproduced through the everyday lives of workers in the core, eco-modernism refuses this difficult political terrain. Huber and Phillips suggest it is 'slander that wor-

kers in the developed world are imperialists whose everyday lives are a primary driver of “ecological breakdown” This is putting words into the mouths of degrowth Marxists. No proponent of the synthesis between Marxism and degrowth has claimed that the lives of workers in the imperial core are a primary driver of our compounding ecological crises. But to say that workers in the imperial core can contribute through their work or consumption should be beyond dispute. To deny this is to blind oneself to the reality of historical capitalism.

## The fetter thesis

Left eco-modernism’s vision of a socialist transition depends on a vulgarized reading of what G.A Cohen calls Marx’s fetter thesis. This is the idea that capital establishes the material and social basis for socialism because at a certain point in capitalism’s development its relations of production become a fetter on the forces of production, which is to say that private property and the private appropriation of socially produced wealth becomes a barrier to human flourishing. To secure further development of production and human emancipation, the relations of production must therefore be ‘burst asunder’, as Marx put it, by the associated producers, ushering in a socialist non-class-based society. The fetter thesis is what lies behind left eco-modernism’s support for nuclear energy, conventional agriculture, and the idea of widespread sustainable air travel.

Revealingly, Huber and Phillips say that the fetter thesis is ‘central to the theory of historical materialism’. To make their point, the co-authors turn to the global response to COVID-19, in which the production and distribution of lifesaving personal protective equipment and vaccinations were indeed fettered by the profit motive. Huber and Phillips choose this example to assert the fetter thesis’ universal applicability. From here, they claim that Saito’s apparent rejection of the fetter thesis is part of his strategy of ‘cherry-picking from the Marxist canon’ to support preconceived political conclusions.



On this, Huber and Phillips should heed their own words. Marx did indeed write about how capital can fetter production and human development, but Marx and others in the Marxist tradition have also repeatedly observed how capital actively ruins the conditions for a post-capitalist, eco-socialist future through what Ali Kadri has recently called the waste of workers, fixed capital, and ecologies.

In a speech delivered to London's German Workers' Educational Society in 1867, Marx spoke about the conditions of struggle in Ireland, explicitly linking Ireland's fight for decolonization to ecology. British colonial rule, Marx argued, had deindustrialized Ireland, transforming it into an export-orientated agricultural economy organized around the needs of its colonizer. The result was the destitution of the Irish worker and peasantry, most notably in the potato famine, and what Marx called the 'exhaustion of the soils', which was less and less able to sustain arable production. These findings would be repeated by numerous anti-colonial Marxist thinkers including Walter Rodney, José Mariátegui, Amílcar Cabral, and Thomas Sankara.

In *Capital Volume One*, published the same year Marx delivered his speech on the Irish Question in London, Marx generalizes these observations. What István Mészáros calls capital's 'metabolic control', is once again said to impoverish what Marx this time calls the 'original source of all wealth — the soil and the worker.' With regards to the working class, Marx writes that 'in agriculture as in manufacturing, the transformation of production under the sway of capital, means, at the same time, the martyrdom of the producer, the instrument of labour becomes the means of enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing the labourer...In modern agriculture, as in the urban industries, the increased productiveness and quantity of the labour set in motion are bought at the cost of laying waste and consuming by disease labour-power itself.'

As for the soil, Marx remarks that 'all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the

fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility...Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.’

Capitalism, in other words, leads to the unevenly distributed ruination of the worker and non-human nature. This amounts to a refutation of Huber and Phillips’ one-sided interpretation of the fetter thesis. By stripping workers of their vitality, freedom, and self-determination, and by undermining the ecological conditions of production, capitalism’s metabolic control is undermining rather than *laying the groundwork* for communism. It is not that the forces and relations of production are coming into contradiction — though this can happen — it is that the totality of capitalist social relations also come into contradiction with, and ruin, or cannibalize its social and ecological basis.

In his 1920 text *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin carries Marx’s idea forward:

Capitalism could have been declared — and with full justice — to be ‘historically obsolete’ many decades ago, but that does not at all remove the need for a very long and persistent struggle on the basis of capitalism.

Samir Amin would later reconfirm Lenin’s conclusion in his study *Obsolescent Capitalism*, which argued for capital’s essentially ruinous nature in colonies and neo-colonies. As would Anouar Abdel-Malek in his study of the place of war in global accumulation, István Mészáros in his writing on waste and capital’s under-utilization, and Ali Kadri in his study of global imperialism.

What emerges from these writings is an appreciation of capital’s violent dialectics of production and destruction. In place of left eco-modernist just-so stories about how every technological advance is a step towards socialism, we are thrown into an uncertain and uncomfortable reality: capital develops “forces of destruction” as Marx puts it at least as much as it develops forces of production. In fact, in today’s world, wrecked, ruined, and ra-

vaged by capital's metabolic control, capitalism arguably destroys and renders destitute far more than it produces or emancipates.

In short, capital is a killing machine. The longer it lasts, the more it kills, maims, and deprives, the more it robs the global working classes of the conditions they need to create a viable post-capitalist future. This is the urgent challenge we face, and it is one that a one-sided interpretation of the fetter thesis and left eco-modernism conceals through techno-optimist fantasies.

## Anti-ecologism

Left eco-modernism's commitment to the fetter thesis also produces a peculiar kind of ecological illiteracy. The basic eco-modernist idea is that once capital's metabolic control over our exchanges with non-human nature have been put to an end, all ecological boundaries and limits can be overcome through sheer ingenuity. As Huber and Phillips explain with reference to global greenhouse gas emissions: 'When we fully shift to clean energy sources such as nuclear, wind, and solar, that climate-related limit on energy use will have been transcended. The only true, *permanently* insuperable limits we face are the laws of physics and logic.'

The first problem with this argument is that Huber and Phillips provide zero evidence to support it. It is simply taken on faith that the levels of energy consumption used in the imperial core can be expanded to the rest of the world without the necessary extraction of resources – lithium, uranium, silica, silver, bauxite, copper — or disposal of waste in various ecological and energetic sinks encountering socio-ecological constraints. In a move worthy of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, Huber and Phillips briefly allude to space mining and space derived energy sources as a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card for the issue of resource limits.

Maybe space mining is possible. Maybe we don't need to worry about disrupted nutrient cycles and eutrophication, or how conventional food systems contribute to biodiversity loss, or the socio-ecological perils of nuclear energy production. But, as Ajay Singh Chaudhary argues, left eco-modernism must provide evidence. So far it has offered only blind faith and techno-optimism.

Unfortunately, as Chaudhary writes, where Huber and Phillips do provide evidence in support of nuclear energy, conventional agriculture, and their other preferred technologies, academic literature is selectively chosen and complicating socio-ecological factors in the technology's viability are frequently overlooked.

All of this would be bad enough, but Huber and Phillips take the extra step of accusing anyone who takes the idea of socio-ecological limits or thresholds seriously of being neo-Malthusian, the same term used to describe a racist eugenicist like Paul Ehrlich, the infamous author of *The Population Bomb*. To do this, they stretch the definition of neo-Malthusianism beyond breaking point.

Huber and Phillips are correct to say that numerous supposedly ecological limits are in fact socially created limits imposed by the prevailing mode of production. The racist, colonial idea that we need to reduce the human population to avoid climate catastrophe, for example, naturalizes the capitalist mode of production. In truth, it is capital's organization of human and non-human nature, not the number of people alive today, that is destroying the planet. Even so, as Huber and Phillips themselves acknowledge with respect to the concentration of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere, there are real biophysical limits that must be respected to maintain a habitable planet for human and non-human life as we know it.

When Huber and Phillips say that recognizing the existence of such socio-ecological limits is 'a species of neo-Malthusianism', they give the term an entirely new meaning. The term neo-Malthusian is usually reserved for those who have replaced Thomas Malthus' ideas of fixed limits on human population numbers with the belief that economic growth and technology can stave off demographic challenges. For neo-Malthusians, in other words, human population increases are still a threat, but the crisis can be averted through technological advancement and increased material throughputs. Degrowth Marxism is neither populationist nor does it argue that technological advances are the way out of the ecological crisis.

Ironically, Neo-Malthusianism properly defined shares far more common ground with Huber and Phillips than it does with

degrowth. Though neither Huber nor Phillips share neo-Malthusianism's concern with rising population numbers, they do participate in the neo-Malthusian tendency to fetishize a very particular configuration of techno-fixes — conventional agriculture and nuclear energy in particular — which are not aligned with the class interests of many of the world's working classes and which require downplaying the socio-ecologically devastating effects of both industries.

## Left eco-modernism: a social chauvinist deviation

Left eco-modernism's lack of engagement with Third World Marxism, its denial of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange, its vulgarization of Marx's analysis of capital, and its anti-ecologism converge in a narrowly nationalist theorisation of socialist transition that comes dangerously close to a programme of nationalist renewal rather than an international socialism.

In his book *Climate Change as Class War* Huber claims to present a politics for 'the majority', by which he means the world's working classes, but in an early footnote he clarifies that the book's analysis and political proposals will be circumscribed within the boundaries of the United States, the working class inhabitants of which form a *minority* of the diverse and divided global working class that is the proper subject of Marxist analysis.

At the end of their article, with their view similarly limited to the political core, Huber and Phillips make a case for unionisation among industrial workers. Good quality well-paid union jobs in green industry are, they suggest, the path to socialism. Huber and Phillips fail to situate this narrowly economistic theory of class struggle within Marx and Marxism's broader vision of social transformation through social revolution. Nor do they place it within an internationalist project of anti-imperialist solidarity, such as that we've seen among the imperial core's trade unions and social movements in response to Israel's genocidal campaign in Palestine. Because of this, Phillips and Huber's article effecti-

vely ends with a class-aware proposal for national renewal that is not at all dissimilar to certain kinds of national conservative thought developing in the US and elsewhere. There is a certain cross-over here with those like the conservative co-founder of *Compact*, Sohrab Ahmari, whose latest book *Tryanny Inc.*, as Jodi Dean has written, calls for renewed working class trade unionism, but unlike Huber and Phillips does so in the name of saving capitalism from itself. Dean ends her review with a plea for the left to avoid the temptation of courting the national conservative right in a bid to amplify its reach and impact. Huber and Phillips' left eco-modernism appears to ignore this warning.

Huber and Phillips have repeatedly claimed degrowth is a middle-class project, but the class affiliations of left eco-modernism has rarely been scrutinised. Michael Lieven argues that Huber's work is aimed less at class struggle than at a class compromise between a primarily white US working class and capital that is 'liberal — and not even liberal'. Indeed, Huber and Phillips have repeatedly published in outlets including *Unherd* and *Compact*, whose editorial lines combine appeals to a nationally circumscribed working class with socially conservative, often anti-trans, racist, and Zionist commentary. In their contributions to these outlets, both authors accuse the Left of rejecting the working class as a political subject and of moralising about working class consumption in the imperial core. This line of argument resonates nicely with national conservative forces who hope to build a new class compromise between certain sections of the imperial core's working class and its capitalist classes.

Lenin once said that social chauvinists insist 'upon the "right" of one or other of the "great" nations to rob the colonies and oppress other peoples.' This is the upshot of a politics, such as the left eco-modernist version of class struggle, that denies the presence of value transfers and uneven ecological exchange, that downplays the socio-ecological consequences of continued or expanding material and energetic throughputs, and that takes a national working class, rather than the global working class, as its political subject. This, very simply, is a politics that has no place on the left.

## Eco-communist strategy

Writing in 1995, with an eye to the world's burgeoning ecological crises, Mészáros warned that in the future 'the challenge facing socialists will present itself as the necessity to put the pieces together and make a workable social metabolic order out of the ruins of the old.' This is still our challenge nearly 30 years later, and the ruins are piling up. Last year was the first time average annual temperatures exceeded the milestone of 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, life sustaining biodiversity has declined 69% in 50 years, ocean temperatures are quite literally off the charts, microplastics are now a constituent part of every raincloud, toxic forever chemicals are present in every new born baby, life expectancy is starting to reverse in the imperial core, imperial wars and genocides are waged with near-impunity, the far-right is in resurgence, and global hunger and dispossession are on the rise. Capital's metabolic control over socio-ecological interactions, in other words, is ruining workers and ecosystems alike. Rather than fettering our collective ingenuity, it is killing workers everywhere and robbing them of the conditions needed to build a world where humans and non-humans alike can flourish.

On a planet wrecked and ruined by capital, further debate with left eco-modernism is a distraction. What's needed more than ever is a deep reflection on political strategy. How can those of us living in the imperial core leverage our position to win an eco-communist future for all? How can we support and amplify existing socialist and anti-imperialist projects and struggles in the periphery? What does a green transition for the core look like in practice if it doesn't exploit the periphery's lands, seas, and labour? And what does it mean to fight for a better future on a wounded world? These are the urgent questions of our time. They are questions left eco-modernism has no answer to because it denies the fundamentals of the problem. To move forward together, then, we must forget eco-modernism.