

(<https://spectrejournal.com>)

First and Third World Ecosocialisms

IMPROVING CONTEMPORARY ECOSOCIALIST DEBATES

DAVID CAMFIELD ([HTTPS://SPECTREJOURNAL.COM/AUTHOR/DAVID-CAMFIELD/](https://spectrejournal.com/author/david-camfield/))

October 5, 2022

As catastrophic floods in Pakistan and drought in Europe and China highlight the ecological crisis of fossil capital, a debate between Matt Huber and Kai Heron in *New Left Review's Sidecar*¹ raises important issues for anyone concerned with understanding and responding politically to our times. This exchange draws attention to questions on which there are significant disagreements between what one could call the ecomodernist and (less satisfactorily) Third Worldist degrowth or degrowth-adjacent strands of ecological marxism.² Although these two perspectives are the most prominent in recent English-language discussions, their limitations call for the further development of a different approach.

The issues at stake are not relevant only to intellectuals with a particular interest in ecological questions; everyone concerned with human well-being must recognize that the late Holocene conditions of relative ecological stability within which the capitalist mode of production emerged and spread no longer exist. The worsening ecological crisis of our current historical period within the Anthropocene will make growing nonlinear ecological instability an increasingly important aspect of the totality of the interlocking matrix of social relations. There has been a “permanent, foundational shift in how human society and economy can operate in the future,”³ with wide-ranging effects on capital accumulation, politics, and other aspects of society. What, then, are the issues raised by the Huber/Heron exchange, and why do they matter?

CAPITALISM'S PRODUCTIVE FORCES

Huber clearly argues, against anti-capitalist degrowth ideas, that “we do need to develop the productive forces – but ecologically. A socialist eco-modernism should make the transformation of production and the productive forces the fulcrum of any

new relation to the planet.” Because capitalism fetters the “technological pathways to halting environmental breakdown,” “solving climate change requires *new* social relations of production that would *develop the productive forces* toward clean production.” Heron rightly responds that technologies do not exist outside of the social relations within which they are developed, and that “instead of seeing capital’s abolition as the unfettering of productive forces, it is better to view it as freeing the world’s producers to choose from a richer and more diverse array of technologies and socio-ecological relations than capitalist industrialization can offer... It is about adopting appropriate technologies and collectively managing energy and food systems at relevant scales.”

Ecomodernist socialism perpetuates a longstanding idea within the marxist tradition that the productive forces themselves are neutral; the problem is the social relations that hinder their deployment for progressive ends. This also tends to involve a narrow conception of what productive forces are – as just technology, and not also forms of social cooperation – and to see them as wholly distinct from the relations of production.⁴ However, if we follow Marx in understanding the productive forces as the productive powers of human labour, then when thinking about these as they exist today we must recognize them as the productive powers of alienated human labour *as developed by capital*. This is not just a matter of the purposes to which they are put, but also about which technologies and forms of cooperation are developed and in what ways. For example, “precision agriculture” – “a new paradigm of capital-intensive industrial agriculture that integrates digital technologies to improve crop yields and manage populations”⁵ – and the mass manufacture of digital devices that are difficult or impossible to repair both reflect specifically capitalist imperatives.

In this way, ecomodernist socialism brings to mind Raya Dunayevskaya’s observation about the marxism of Second International figures like Kautsky and Hilferding: “there is no longer any sense of breaking the chains of the ubiquitous capitalist machine, nor of... the total reorganization of the relations of men [sic] at the point of production *by the men [sic] themselves*.”⁶ Any hint of the critique of technology fetishism also found within the marxist tradition is altogether absent. The very embrace of the ecomodernist label by a marxist is itself remarkable, given that ecomodernism is so clearly a case of bourgeois ideology.⁷

How we think about forces of production matters today and will become even more important as ruling-class responses to climate change come to rely on technological fixes, including ones like solar radiation management and nuclear fusion that exist barely or not at all.⁸ The approach taken by Heron is considerably more fruitful for addressing the many questions related to the ecological crisis that involve capitalism’s productive forces.

IMPERIALISM

In *Climate Change as Class War*, Huber frames the climate justice struggle as “a global class struggle between capital and an international working class” and not “a struggle between Global North and Global South.”⁹ Heron contends that this approach posits a “false choice” between anti-imperialist and class-struggle politics. More broadly, Heron charges ecomodernist marxism with inattention to imperialism, including its ecological dimensions. For example, Huber ignores the question of ecologically unequal exchange, which Andreas Malm defines as “transactions that might seem fair on the monetary surface, but allow rich countries to absorb biophysical resources from the poor and drain their natural endowments,” as in how “the American appetite for hamburger is satisfied from pastures carved out of the Amazon.”¹⁰ This charge is generally persuasive, both at the analytical and political levels.

“

The very embrace of the ecomodernist label by a marxist is itself remarkable, given that ecomodernism is so clearly a case of bourgeois ideology.

Unfortunately, there are also serious problems in Heron’s anti-imperialism, as in those of the Third Worldist strand of ecological marxism more broadly. While rejecting the idea that the working class in imperialist countries is not exploited, Heron endorses theories of imperialism whose handling of unequal exchange and super-exploitation is vulnerable to critique.¹¹ Heron’s contention that workers in the core “benefit from a capitalist system that pits them against their peripheral counterparts” is partially true but inadequate. Access to imported beef, coffee, and other products of ecologically unequal exchange is a reality, but higher profits derived from the operations of imperialism (or anything else) never automatically trickle down into higher wages; the balance of class power is crucial in determining wage levels. For decades this balance has been tilting further away from labour on a global scale as capitalist competition in a world economy organized in part by imperialist relations has intensified. The dispossession of more peasants and other independent producers, the elimination of many relatively-better jobs in both the private and public sectors, and the weakening of welfare state programs as military spending grows have all increased competition among people seeking work for wages. War, oppression, and ecological crisis, all of which are fuelled by imperialism, have also swelled the ranks of people desperate for paid work, whether in the South or, through migration, in the North. At the same time policy changes and technological development have also reduced barriers to capitalists moving the production of many

goods and some services from imperialist to imperialized countries. People in imperialist states are encouraged to identify with “their” imperialism, binding workers to their rulers and exploiters. Thus in various ways the working class in imperialist countries loses more than it benefits from imperialism.¹²

How ecosocialists understand imperialism has clear political consequences for how they approach movement organizing, their stance to states in the imperialist chain that descends from the US to the UK, Germany, France and China to lesser imperialist powers including Canada and Russia, and their orientation to imperialized states.¹³ Heron is right to call for a politics that can “do the difficult work of developing strategies of struggle and ecological transition that meet the needs of the exploited and oppressed in the Global North in ways that are compatible with demands for colonial reparations, technology transfers, food sovereignty, land back, the lifting of sanctions, the end of occupations and the atmospheric space to develop freely and independently.” Yet ecological marxism must also avoid the pitfalls of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” politics to which Third Worldism often succumbs.¹⁴

ECOLOGICAL LIMITS

Huber’s critique of “utopianism” in today’s anti-capitalist ecological thought is important but entirely fails to reckon with a scientific truth that Heron puts plainly: “the Global North’s energy and resource use cannot be extended to the rest of the world without exceeding the planet’s biophysical limits.” *Climate Change as Class War* generally ignores the question of how a just and rapid global transition from fossil fuels and other sources of greenhouse gas emissions could be carried out. This would have to entail imperialized countries using more energy to meet people’s needs as they simultaneously decarbonized, and consequently a reduction in energy demand within advanced capitalist countries. For marxists to take ecology as seriously as the crisis demands, we must grapple with the findings of Earth System science and think through the implications for immediate climate justice demands and for our global vision of ecosocialism. Materialists ought not to ignore the biophysical limits often theorized as planetary boundaries, which, as Ian Angus helpfully puts it, “can be compared to guard rails on mountain roads, which are positioned to prevent drivers from reaching the edge, not on the edge itself.”¹⁵

At stake here is nothing less than how well marxist analyses of ecological crisis and political responses to it measure up to scientific knowledge of that crisis, no matter how unsettling some of its implications may be for some people in the advanced capitalist countries.

STRATEGY

Ecological marxism cannot stop at analyzing the unfolding catastrophe; it must also guide efforts to work towards a transition to ecosocialism. As I hinted above, a great strength of Huber's approach is its argument for a class-struggle strategy for ecosocialism based on "analysis of the concrete class relationships that both inhibit... transformations or might bring them about" as an alternative to utopian leaps into abstraction when it comes to how transformation could be achieved. His insistence that "we need a climate politics that aims outward, beyond the already converted – towards the exploited and atomized working class" is vitally important. Although Heron agrees in general – while criticizing Huber's "false choice" between working-class politics and anti-imperialism – the Third Worldist strand of ecological marxism has yet to produce a grounded political strategy like the one that Huber proposes for people in the US in *Climate Change as Class War*.

“

A radical GND in a country like the US needs to include, along with the usual GND reforms, measures to assist imperialized countries with their own just transitions and to cut domestic energy demand – reforms that reflect a decommodifying internationalist climate justice politics of better rather than more, of public luxury and private sufficiency.

In that book Huber argues for working-class struggle for a Green New Deal (GND), a "*politics of more* that explains how much we have to gain from a climate program." He sees this in terms of "a mass, working-class electoral coalition to win state power" backed up by the "disruptive power" of strike action.¹⁶ He then makes a case for a much narrower strategy: rank and file workplace organizing among electrical power workers in order to fight for public ownership of the sector. Class struggle for a GND is, at a general level, a compelling orientation.

The content of such a package is important to specify, though. A radical GND in a country like the US needs to include, along with the usual GND reforms, measures to assist imperialized countries with their own just transitions and to cut domestic energy demand – reforms that reflect a decommodifying internationalist climate justice politics of *better* rather than *more*, of public luxury and private sufficiency. The strategy of electing a socialist government within the existing state that, with the backing of workers' direct action, will implement radical reforms as a road to socialism is unrealistic; we should know by now that capitalist state power cannot be so easily taken over and wielded against capitalism and that the working class cannot rule through its alienated bureaucratic institutions.¹⁷ Further, in response to Huber's

case for focussing organizing efforts in the electrical power sector, Jonathan Rosenblum rightly argues “a working-class-based climate movement doesn’t have the luxury of time to focus in just one place.”¹⁸

One important theoretical task is analyzing the global working class in relation to global capital. As Heron recognizes, the class really is deeply divided and hierarchically stratified as a consequence of capitalist development and various forms of oppression. Yet the working class also has common interests that are, contrary to Heron, “an objective reality” because of how people are located within capitalist social relations. These provide a material basis for the convergence of struggles and the forging of solidarity between people whose conditions are in some ways quite different.

So oriented, ecological marxist theory can guide the practice of mass movement climate justice politics in both paid workplace and community organizing. In addition to digging in where people work and live, its supporters need to be ready to intervene constructively in unexpected upsurges of protest and resistance like the “yellow vests” movement in France in 2018-19 and the uprising against racism in the US in 2020. Even if ecological concerns are not what is putting people into motion, ecological marxists risk irrelevance if they cannot respond to and become part of social eruptions in ways that allow them to build political relationships and help people to make connections and bring out the ecological dimensions of struggles against injustice.¹⁹

WHAT WOULD ECOSOCIALISM BE?

Although it does not surface directly in the Heron-Huber exchange, the character of the society that ought to replace capitalism is also a central question for ecological marxism today. Here ecomodernists and Third Worldists have more in common than they may realize. Huber sees China today as not fully capitalist because of its state-owned enterprises, and Heron seems to think that at least under Mao China was socialist.²⁰ The common ground between marxists in the traditions of Karl Kautsky and Mao Zedong is the belief that state ownership of the means of production makes a society non-capitalist even when the state is not made up of new radically democratic institutions of self-government through which the working class runs society, “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor” hailed by Marx in the Paris Commune and dubbed a “semi-state” by Lenin in *State and Revolution*.²¹

Breaking with capitalism and beginning a transition to ecosocialism is not a short-term prospect anywhere in the world today, but this does not mean that the character of ecosocialism or what would be required to begin to reconstruct society in its

direction are irrelevant matters. They shape what we can call, following Daniel Bensaid, a regulatory horizon that, through many mediations, ought to inform theory and action today.²² Ecological marxists in the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg and William Morris insist that the prerequisite for initiating this revolutionary transition would be a self-emancipatory rupture that establishes the democratic rule of the direct producers themselves, not the taking of state power by a party acting on their behalf. Of course, the dire state of the world ought to encourage collaboration among adherents of all strands of ecological marxism wherever possible. Areas of agreement deserve to be recognized, and disagreements kept in proportion. Yet we cannot afford to ignore what can be learned from the historical experiences of social democracy and Stalinism in the twentieth century,²³ especially as we confront the horrors of the twenty-first.

“““