

# ECOSOCIALISM AND DEGROWTH

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The term ‘ecosocialism’ only entered common usage among environmental activists and commentators at the end of the 20th century, yet its roots can be identified nearly two centuries earlier. In this chapter, I chart the evolution of ecosocialism from the early 19th century to the present day. I consider it as a development of, and deviation from, earlier socialist traditions, as well as in its relationship to degrowth. I approach the material historically, surveying the evolution of growth-sceptical and eco-socialist currents, as well as the ‘productivist’ socialisms that they challenge. Although growth ideology did not achieve its full form until the 20th century, its pre-history was long, and the same applies to critiques of growth. The 1970s was a pivotal decade when different strands of growth critique became more visible and more coherently articulated, but they had begun to emerge already in the 18th century, if not before, in critiques of colonial capitalism and industrialism (Schmelzer 2022).

Socialism, like degrowth, can be approached as a social movement, an ethico-political stance or a political ideology. My focus here is on ideas and ideology, more than social movements. Political ideology, in Michael Freeden’s ‘morphological’ sense, refers to patterned and recurring sets of ideas and values that structure the terrain of socio-political discourse – they possess identifiable shapes even as they mutate, mutually influencing and overlapping with other political ideologies (Eagleton-Pierce 2021). But the morphological conception has a blind spot: it portrays political ideologies as pluralistic and free-floating. If some, notably Freeden’s own liberalism, are more popular, this is seen as a natural outcome of healthy competition within the marketplace of political ideas. As such, the morphological conception in itself is ideological in the Marxist sense – it naturalises and mystifies the reigning hierarchies of social power.

Socialism, throughout its history, has been defined against the prevailing political ideologies of liberalism and conservatism. These emanated from, and justified, the institutions of capitalism, its systems of market economy, private property, wage labour, nation-states, ‘rule of law’, and colonial and neo-colonial domination. Differences between the two system-supporting ideologies are a matter of emphasis, with nation and mysticism closer to the conservative heart, global markets and rationalism to the liberal; suspicion of reform for one, meliorism for the other, and so on. In common they represent the historically constructed capitalist ‘order’ as natural and transhistorical, inevitable and fundamentally good.

The twin system-supporting ideologies originated in a historical period in which revolutions were securing the early victories of capitalist forces. Liberalism's early appearances came during the Dutch revolt and the English civil war, and conservatism during the French revolution – at the same moment, as it happens, that the term *ideology* was coined. Modern conservatism's seminal opus was the pamphlet by Edmund Burke (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, on the first 15 months of that upheaval. Yet those same revolutions – with institutions visibly being made, unmade, and re-imagined – also encouraged critical ideologies to emerge. In revolutionary England and France, such groups as the Diggers, Levellers and La société des égaux mobilised behind radically democratic demands that the propertied classes would not countenance. In short, in revolutionary conjunctures critical approaches to the emergent capitalist order came to the fore, which then, following the French Revolution, crystallised as socialism and anarchism.

This is not to suggest a simple binary of liberalism and conservatism as system-supporting ideologies in contrast to socialism and anarchism. The latter, system-critical, currents channel the assumptions and prejudices of the world in which they have evolved. They exist as fields of contest, crisscrossed by multiple divisions, some of which concern nature–society relations. In the next section, I suggest that a divide between 'productivist' and 'eco' socialisms existed from the very beginning.

### Early productivist socialism

Among the first to claim the word 'socialism' were followers of the French count Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Saint-Simon's philosophy was born of and against the French Revolution. That is to say, he opposed its leaders and the Terror, while retaining something of its spirit: a conviction that social institutions (including property) are subject to change and replacement, an awareness of the pivotal role played by ideas at historical switching points, a commitment to a more rationalised bourgeois order, and a belief that human history takes the form of linear Progress, such that a new order on a higher spiritual plane was already coming into view. As the founder of socialism's 'productivist' branch, Saint-Simon anticipated a socialist order that would be geared to 'the positive purpose of increasing its prosperity, at a minimum cost and in minimum time' (cited in Hayek 2013, p. 207). He revered France's big corporations, seeing in their organisational structure and rationality the blueprint for an efficiently administered society, with their wealth as a fund to be tapped for public-works programmes. The heroes of his socialist future would not be workers – who should remain subordinated to their employers (Carlisle 1974, p. 448) – but industrialists, scientists and engineers, flanked by bankers and artists (Saint-Simon 1964 [1825], p. 77). A diehard defender of social hierarchy, crowned by the 'magnificent diamond' of the monarchy itself (Saint-Simon 1964 [1825], p. 80); he saw no role for proletarian democracy – or indeed for any democracy at all.

The socialism of the Saint-Simonians, notwithstanding their criticisms of laissez-faire policies, which they held responsible for economic crises, and of the 'bourgeoisie', which they defined idiosyncratically as the class of lawyers and 'metaphysicians', was thoroughly bourgeois. Social progress would come through industrialisation, with scientists and business leaders at the helm, and would be motivated by goals of economic efficiency, scientific and technological advance, a rationalised management of social organisation, and the European control of the colonised world. They aspired, in short, to the 'progressive increase of control by man over things'; they affirmed and helped to consolidate a core ideology of bourgeois rule: the growth paradigm (Kumar 1978, p. 40; Dale 2017).

### **Breaking nature's social union**

In the same period, the early 19th century, other socialists were developing ideas critical of growth ideology. The Swiss economist JCL Simonde de Sismondi, an economic Romantic and a socialist *avant la lettre*, was a precursor of Germany's historicist economists in his 'ethical economics', and of Russia's Narodniks and Karl Polanyi in his championing of peasant production, guild organisation and local economies (Lenin 1897; Polanyi 1945). His blasts against liberal political economy anticipated socialist and ecological critiques of growthism. The quest to maximise output, he maintained, had overshadowed the true goals of economic activity – leisure and the use and enjoyment of goods. Money had become an end in itself and, in a class-divided society, this led the propertyless to overwork in order that the propertied could overconsume – a condition that was most egregious in Britain, a land of abject poverty amid plenty. In the United States (US), too, Sismondi (1991 [1818], p. 339) lamented:

profit making has become the first aim in life [and] liberty itself has been cheapened relative to profit. The calculating business spirit extends down to the children; it subjects real estate to constant speculation; . . . it corrupts the very agents of a free government, who show a not-very-respectable avidity for office.

If Sismondi did not explicitly identify as a socialist, others influenced by his thinking did. One was the Irish socialist feminist William Thompson (Pankhurst 1991, pp. 38, 44). In his *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, Thompson (1824) constructed a counter-hegemonic discourse of critical political economy (McNally 2000, p. 445). Taking aim at Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo, Thompson (1824, p. vi) charged them with having no other concern than to ensure that:

the machines, whether living, as cows, men, or horses . . . should produce in the greatest abundance all articles of food, clothing, shelter, and elegance, or caprice; and that, on the other hand, means should be devised that an abundance of consumers should be found to use the articles produced, so that every year a continual demand should be kept up for these or similar articles.

Political economy in their hands had become a vulgar discipline devoted to a narrowly economic goal – 'how to raise the greatest produce and to ensure the greatest consumption' (Thompson 1824, p. vi). This rendered superfluous all the critical questions of how and by whom the goods are produced – 'whether by camels, horses, men, slaves or not slaves, whether by hard labour or easy labour, [or] by healthful or life-consuming exertion' (Thompson 1824, p. vi). Economic growth, Thompson conceded, may be worth pursuing but only if the needs of the populace are first acknowledged as society's paramount concern, with resource distribution conducted justly.

Alongside the critical political economy of Sismondi and Thompson, the same period saw the first stirrings of *romantic ecosocialism*. Its exponents diagnosed the assault by capitalist forces on the biosphere and prescribed reforms to heal the wounds. An early exemplar – a precursor of romanticism and socialism – was Rabbin Burns. His *Now Westlin Winds* (1775) inveighs against blood sports and 'Tyranic man's dominion', while *To a Mouse* is a lament on the breaking of 'Nature's social union' under 'Man's dominion' (Burns 1785). But if the romantic-socialist tradition has one founding document, I would venture, it was Charles Fourier's (2017 [1821])

*Material deterioration of the planet.* In his views on growth, progress, civilisation and the natural world, Fourier established a distinctively ‘eco’ strand within the socialist movement. In contrast to Saint-Simon, Fourier (2017 [1821], Gareth Dale translation) decried ‘the ravages [of] civilised industry’ – his term for industrial capitalism. Not only the earth but even the air, Fourier (1901, p. 110) blazed, is subject to ‘industrial exploitation’. Fourier (1901, p. 109) accused ‘Civilized and Barbarian societies’ alike of ‘despoiling the soil and the climate’, such that the ‘health’ of the planet itself suffered grievously. In some branches of industry, wrote Fourier (1901, p. 109) civilisation was ‘wholly savage’ while:

in other branches of great importance notably water and forests, we fall far below the savages. For we do not, like them, confine ourselves to leaving them uncultivated; we bring the axe and destruction, and the result is landslides, the denuding of mountain-sides, and the deterioration of the climate.

Future earth dwellers, Fourier (1901, p. 109) warned, ‘will curse civilisation’ for the ecological damage it has wreaked. In 1821, the suggestion of Fourier (2017 [1821]) that some branches of industry in civilised Europe were ‘beneath the savages’ was audacious indeed.

### Narodnik ecosocialisms

Ecosocialism’s next step, in the mid-19th century, occurred in the context of a flourishing of the life sciences – notably Justus von Liebig’s agronomic discoveries in the 1840s and, in 1859, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. Ernst Haeckel, steeped in a Romantic *Naturphilosophie* that treats the natural world as a living whole, coined the term ‘ecology’ to refer to a science that studies ‘the interrelationships of organisms with one another and with their environment’ (Haeckel 1866, p. 286, Gareth Dale translation). As industrialisation and urbanisation gathered steam, interest in energy and thermodynamics blossomed – particularly following the celebrated essay by Sadi Carnot (1988 [1824]) – as did Malthusian concerns over resource exhaustion and the limits to growth. In 1864, George Perkins Marsh proposed in *Man and Nature* that the collapse of the Greek and Roman empires had resulted from their degradation of the environment (Cronon 1994, p. 606). Two years later, in *The Coal Question*, William Jevons (1866) fretted that a similar fate would befall British imperialism if coal were to run short.

One figure sometimes nominated as an early ecosocialist is the Ukrainian Narodnik physician and philosopher Serhiy Podolynsky (1850–1891) aka Sergei Podolinski (Martinez-Alier 1987; O’Connor 1998; Burkett and Foster 2008). His interests lay in energy economics, socialism and Darwinian evolution. His best-known argument was his redefining of labour productivity as the accumulation of energy (Podolinsky 1883, p. 454). Humans are energy accumulators – they can be likened to the ‘perfect thermodynamic engine’ of Carnot (1988 [1824]), in that they convert heat into work and vice versa. Humanity’s species history, Podolinsky (1883, p. 454) proposed, is at core the evolution of our ability to accumulate energy, for it is upon this that all social progress depends, as measured by economic prosperity and population size. According to his ‘march of progress’ narrative, in prehistoric times, ‘savages, lacking culture as they did not perform labour’, possessed barely any ability to store energy (Podolinsky 1883, pp. 453–6, Gareth Dale translation). From these lowly beginnings, the slave economies of antiquity represented a significant advance, and feudalism was a small step further, before capitalism facilitated a prodigious leap in our ability to accumulate energy and apply it to machinery (Podolinsky 1883, p. 457). In socialism, in contrast to capitalism, productivity gains would bring reductions in working time,

even as the transhistorical trend to the ever-greater ‘accumulation of energy’ would continue and accelerate.

That Podolynsky has been hailed an ecosocialist rests on his anti-capitalist politics combined with the thesis that energy is the key to social progress. An alternative lineage, romantic ecosocialism, was also active among his Narodnik comrades. Its best-known exponent was the Russian novelist and philosopher Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889). In his works, such as *What Is to Be Done?* (Chernyshevsky 1989 [1863]), one finds Romantic panegyrics to fauna and flora (at least insofar as they have been tamed and cultivated by humans), a taste for the frugal life, and a belief in the ability of the peasant commune to form the basis of a socialist order. In common with nearly all 19th-century socialists, however, he exuded boundless confidence in the transformative potential of technologies. England, with its population of 17 million would, he enthused, grow its population to 150 million if technology were systematically applied to agriculture (Franco 2021).

### **Marx, Engels and productive forces**

In the age of Saint-Simon and Fourier, socialist groups were small, centred in clubs and societies, and a scattering of ‘utopian’ communes. They did not orient to working people, seeing them as deserving of charity or respect but not as agents of socialist transformation. In the 1840s this shifted, thanks to social movements: Chartism, cooperatives and the 1848 revolutions. As popular militancy surged the socialist tree branched out, most significantly with the revolutionary ecosocialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Taking inspiration from Chartism and the 1848 revolutions, they were the first socialists to fuse two previously separated aspirations – the collectivist re-structuring of society and the democratic self-activity of the working class (Draper 1966). Their vision of socialism as revolutionary democracy gained further definition in 1871, when working people demonstrated that they can successfully overthrow the capitalist state and construct their own, radically democratic, institutions, specifically the Paris Commune. Unlike bourgeois governments run by elites through their ‘oligarchic club’, wrote Marx (1871), the commune demonstrated the capacity of the people to act ‘for itself by itself’.

In that they celebrate humanity’s world-transforming capacities and technological advance, Marx and Engels’ ecosocialism is contested. Were they not ‘Prometheans’ who worshipped at the altar of economic growth and technological progress? Certainly, they marvelled at technology’s role in the construction of industrial plants, which, in turn, would enable the potential abundance on which a transition to communism would depend. And yet, with Fourier and against Saint-Simon, they also took inspiration from pre-industrial – indeed, pre-civilisational – ‘primitive communism’. They knew admiration for the world-changing forces of capitalist industrialisation and yet were no techno-utopians or growth boosters. Nor did they hold that socialist revolution must await global industrialisation. As is evident from the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1848), they believed that the productive forces, at least in some regions, had already crossed the threshold at which a transition to communism could commence. This was in 1848, before the invention of the car, the telephone, even the safety pin.

At the heart of debates over Marx’s ecosocialism lie differing interpretations of production and the productive forces (*Produktivkräfte*). Production can be thought of as brute economic output, but this was not Marx’s usage. Rather, as Eric Wolf (1982, p. 21) explains, production embraces:

at once the changing relations of humankind to nature, the social relations into which humans enter in the course of transforming nature, and the consequent transformations of

human symbolic capability. The concept is thus not merely economic in the strict sense but also ecological, social, political, and social-psychological.

As to the productive forces, they signify human creative capacities in the most universal and general sense. Marx (1975 [1845]) chides Saint-Simon for having confused productive forces in that sense with their specifically bourgeois form. Under capitalism, Marx and Engels (1845) wrote, the productive forces receive ‘a one-sided development only’, becoming, for the masses, ‘destructive forces’. Production in capitalist society ‘appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production’, with concrete human labour, and therefore human life activity and creativity itself, subjected to an ‘external end’ – the drive to accumulate capital (Marx 1973 [1857–1861], p. 488).

This is the nub of Marx and Engels’ critique of growth ideology. Although ‘economic growth’ had not yet entered the lexicon, the social relations that constitute it were the subject of their critique, in several respects. One is their identification of the ‘fuel’, so to speak, of the growth drive – ‘the restless never-ending process of profit-making’ as the historical mission of the bourgeoisie (Marx 1887 [1867]). Another is the fetishised form that it assumes. Only in a society based on wage labour does the production and exchange of goods and services appear as an independent domain – the ‘economy’. In this topsy-turvy world, material relations between persons take the ‘fantastic form’ of relations between things. This fetish character of commodities underpins the ideology of growth. Third, Marx developed the critique, earlier adumbrated by Sismondi, Thompson and others, of the relative poverty necessarily generated by capitalist growth. ‘Rapid growth of productive capital calls forth just as rapid a growth of wealth, of luxury, of social needs and social pleasures’, wrote Marx (1847) in *Wage Labour and Capital*, consequently:

although the pleasures of the labourer have increased, the social gratification which they afford has fallen in comparison with the increased pleasures of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, in comparison with the stage of development of society in general.

The final element in Marx and Engels’ growth critique flows from their materialism, a philosophy centred on the metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) between humans and their natural environment (Bensaïd 2009, p. 323). His metabolic conception of nature–society relations departed dramatically from the bourgeois point of view of its ‘usefulness to man’ (Schmidt 1971, pp. 78–9), while his concept of alienation introduced the fundamentally ecosocialist idea that under capitalism the subordination of labour operates conjointly with the subjugation of nature. Humanity’s metabolism with nature, as he theorised it, had become annexed to the drive to distort, despoil and to expand value at an increasing pace, as accumulation is sustained by ever greater material inputs in a process that ‘goes on uninterruptedly, with feverish haste and upon an ever more gigantic scale’ (Marx 1847). Moreover, Marx’s critique of political economy points to the mechanisms by which capital not only wreaks ecological destruction but obscures the process (Brown 2024).

In their later lives, Marx and Engels’ ecological awareness deepened. Following his reading of Justus von Liebig on soil depletion, Marx refers to a metabolic rift between human society and nature (Foster 2000), and developed a critical awareness of numerous empirical elements of humanity’s interaction with its environment, including cash crop agriculture, deforestation and its effects, and the wastefulness of manufacturing industry (Saito 2017). Meanwhile, in his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels (1940 [1883]) admonished those who conceive nature as something to be conquered and identified the system-driven quest for short-term profit as culpable for the despoliation of the natural world.

In short, Marx and Engels developed an understanding of capitalism as a future-blind system that is driven to sabotage its conditions of possibility, a system that moulds human society around the compulsive drive to accumulate, with each capital forced to expand sales, expand the scale of production, suppress costs (including wages), and treat nature as an externality. This accumulation drive governs the behaviour of businesses and states – the owners and controllers of most of the world’s land and resources – but the way we apprehend it is mediated ideologically, as ‘growth’.

Marx and Engels’ ecosocialism was developed by numerous followers, of whom William Morris (1834–1896) deserves particular mention. He braided romantic and Marxian threads into a social-aesthetic critique of the injustice and ugliness of industrial capitalism. How modern civilisation’s ‘neglect of art’ has despoiled our planet (‘this great treasure of mankind’) he laments in *Hopes and Fears on Art* (Morris 1882). The earth, ‘which was beautiful before man lived on it’, and for thousands of years grew more beautiful as humans ‘grew in numbers and power, is now growing uglier day by day’, and its decline is the most egregious ‘where civilisation is the mightiest’ (Morris 1882). Culpable for the decline was the system of ‘modern commerce’; to squeeze every last ounce of profit from a patch of land, people will ‘cut down the pleasant trees . . . blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke’ (Morris, cited in Bartels 2003).

### **Socialist growthmanship**

In the late 19th century Morris was an outstanding example of an ecosocialist working within a Marxist orbit. He was, however, an exception. Although the environmentalist commitments of Marx and Engels have recently been explored in detail (Burkett 1999; Foster 2000; Saito 2017), they had hitherto been read chiefly as boosters of industrialisation and economic growth. Why was this?

Essentially, the socialist movement evolved into a project of state-capitalist modernisation, along Saint-Simonian lines albeit with greater emphasis on the extension of state control. Socialists hailed nationalisations as ‘state socialism’ even when, as with German Chancellor Bismarck’s nationalisation of railways, it was simply a war measure. To Germany’s social-democrat leader, Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), and to the *Kathedersozialisten* (academic socialists), the state was not, as Marx argued, an instrument of class domination but of rational regulation and social justice – and the administrator of the growth drive (albeit the latter, at this time, was formulated in terms of prosperity, opulence, wealth and so on). An influential early intervention was that of Karl Rodbertus (1805–1875), a *Kathedersozialist* and close friend of Lassalle. He subscribed to Ricardo’s ‘iron law of wages’ – the thesis that, without intervention, the wage share of national income inevitably declines – and proposed a strategy to counter it based on producer cooperatives, state intervention and growth. Society, maintained Rodbertus, ‘needs the unrestricted growth of wealth’; indeed, whoever obstructs ‘the growth of wealth stands in the way of social progress *tout court*’ for every expansion of ‘knowledge and know how is bound up with the increase in wealth’ (Rodbertus 1850, p. 80, Gareth Dale translation).

Marx and Engels’ attempts to win over Germany’s social-democratic party were defeated by the Lassalleans and the *Kathedersozialisten*, and in European labour parties economic growth gained ever greater prominence as a policy goal. Fabian socialists such as Eduard Bernstein presented growth, together with parliamentary democracy, as the twin drivers of a grand evolutionary movement towards a socialist society (Steger 1997, p. 177). A paradigmatic case was Sweden’s Social Democratic Party (SAP). Early on, the SAP’s goals included working-class emancipation and the all-round transformation of capitalist society, including large-scale nationalisations

(Pontusson 1987). Later, in the inter-war period, the quest for ‘equal rewards’ and economic democracy, as well as the nationalisation programme, were abandoned in favour of aspirations to ‘economic growth [and] democratised opportunities’ (Esping-Andersen 1992, pp. 37–8; Berman 2006, p. 174). The shift was given theoretical justification by Keynesianism, which presented wage rises as a growth accelerator and no longer a brake. Finally, after World War II, the SAP’s strategy centred on promoting growth through wage bargaining. Wage rises for low-paid workers would compel businesses to invest, while wage restraint for higher-paid workers would encourage the expansion of the more efficient sectors by boosting their profits (Pontusson 1987). In such ways, Keynesianism and social democracy came to be identified with a ‘grand bargain’ whereby regulated national capitalisms would foster growth, the fruits of which would then be fairly shared.

Meanwhile in Russia, the innovative and progressive environmental policies of the immediate post-revolutionary years found themselves steamrollered under Stalin’s ‘counter-revolution of modernisation’ (Weiner 2000; Dale 2017). In 1928, industrialisation targets were revised sharply upwards, in order to ‘Catch Up and Overtake’ [Догнат и Перегнат] the West. Paradoxically perhaps, economic planning formed the centrepiece of the counter-revolution, for it was with the Five-Year Plan that coercion supplanted tolerance throughout Soviet society, competitive industrialisation became the national mantra, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union became ‘economised’, in that its overriding goal became mobilising society behind the growth drive. A state-capitalist growth ideology came into being, similar to its siblings in the West, in both content and in the enthusiasm it could invoke – among, for instance, the citizens who named their children Догнат (catch up) and Перегнат (overtake) (Chertkovskaya 2019).

In the mid-20th century, the world economy’s most étatiste era, socialist and communist parties entered office, in East and West, and transformed into apparatuses of state management. When parties influenced by Marxism took the reins of capitalist states, such as the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Stalin’s Russia or Mao’s China, they quickly accommodated to capitalist norms and requirements. Thus, in the Soviet Union, Marxism was redesigned on conservative-developmental lines, in support of dirigiste industrialisation and Great Russian chauvinism.

### **‘Pull the emergency brake!’**

In socialism’s march towards ‘modernity’, ecological critique was sidelined. But it was not snuffed out. In the margins, it developed. Labour movements themselves were continually throwing up environmental demands. These represent a continuation of the struggle for humane conditions of social reproduction; battles over the workplace environment are continuous with the goals of the environmental movement. One such, concerning the white phosphorus used in London’s match factories, that brought necrosis to the matchgirls’ jaws, catalysed the wave of industrial militancy from which the ‘new unionism’ arose. Other tributaries into socialist ecological thinking issued from religion, Rousseauian and Romantic philosophy, and science. Of the latter, the novelist HG Wells is a case in point. Although adhering to Fabianism, a social-democratic grouping not known for environmental leanings, *The Science of Life* (1929–1930), which Wells co-authored with Julian Huxley, called for pollution reduction, protection of endangered species, and the development of alternative sources of power (Worster 1994, p. 314). Ultimately, however, Wells and Huxley are better described as scientific rationalists or ecological modernisers than ecosocialists. They were believers in the advance of humanity’s mastery of nature by means of ever-expanding technological power and, in this, they were followed by communist scientists such as Jack Haldane, JD Bernal and Joseph Needham (Wood 1959).

For sketches of a more richly ecological socialism emerging in the same period, one could do worse than read the communist philosopher Walter Benjamin. He was among the most acute critics of Marxism's technological-determinist turn, and the first to draw attention to the critique of technology fetishism in Marx's writings (Benjamin 1999, p. 195). Germany's SPD and its sister parties worldwide, he argued, had become prisoners of the conviction that the historical tide was on their side, pushed ever onward by the locomotive of 'technological development' (Benjamin 2006). From there, it had been a short step 'to the illusion that factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement', hence to a 'corrupted conception' of industry that recognises only 'progress in mastering nature' and not the attendant forms of regress, and finally to the 'naïvely complacent' belief – held by social-democrat and liberal economists alike – that nature donates itself 'gratis' to humanity (Benjamin 2006, p. 391). On the mastery of nature, the formulation of Benjamin (1928, Gareth Dale translation) is especially pregnant and worth quoting in full:

The mastery of nature, according to the imperialists, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a flogging-master who claimed that the purpose of education is the mastery of children by adults? Is education not above all the essential regulation of the relationship between the generations – and thus the mastery, if we are to speak of mastery, is of that relationship and not of children? In similar manner, technology is not about the mastery of nature but mastering the relationship between nature and humanity.

Against social democracy's conception of labour as the 'exploitation of nature', Benjamin (2006) affirmed Fourier's view of labour as a creative engagement with nature; against its accommodation with capitalism and its ideology of progress-as-mastery, he affirmed a communist politics aspiring to a rupture with the historical present. The goal, in his celebrated phrase that has more recently gained a degrowth resonance, must be to 'pull the emergency brake' (Benjamin 2006, p. 392).

### **Global South socialisms**

Concurrently with Benjamin, the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui was, on similar lines, concluding that social democracy had arrived at a bourgeois dead end. Mariátegui's writings are emblematic of what may be called Global South ecosocialism, in their focus on the extractivism and plunder that motivate the imperial, settler-colonial and neocolonial projects. The monocrop export agriculture of Peru's coastal plantations, Mariátegui (1928) describes, was the product of 'economic colonization' by Western capital. Overcoming imperial domination, however, would not be achieved via national capitalist development. Mariátegui had no time for the *soi-disant* anti-imperialisms that restricted their critique to the external shackles on 'capitalist growth and expansion', without heed to the class antagonisms on which any national capitalism would continue to rest (Mariátegui 1971 [1929]). The anti-imperial and class struggles, he argued, must be unified – and in the Latin American region that required indigenous communities to come to the fore, in alliance with other rural and urban working classes (Gonzalez 2019).

In his references to Pacha Mama and indigenous communitarianism, Mariátegui (1971 [1929]) anticipated 21st-century ecosocialisms, while his advocacy of the nationalisation of natural resources was in line with a broad swathe of socialist thinking. The problems of whether and how to catch up with the West, while exiting the extractivist models that prevailed in most post-colonial economies and conserving the natural environment, however, were as intractable then as now. Many Global South socialists would have concurred with Egyptian-French economist Samir Amin

(1976, p. 385), that ‘there can be *no conflict* between growth and the construction of a worldwide socialist civilization’.

In Peru, a century after its independence, Mariátegui was grappling with the problem that formal sovereignty may well not negate actual subordination to Western capital. In the 1950s and 1960s similar problems spread out across Africa and Asia. All the newly liberated nations aspired to close the gap with the Global North through rapid growth, usually through import-substitution industrialisation and in some cases following the Soviet model. Socialist critique of the newly elevated national bourgeoisie was voiced most eloquently by the revolutionary Narodnik, Frantz Fanon. Pointing to the experience of Latin America where national capitalist classes usurped independence in the name of the nation and pursued their own agenda of ‘avid, greedy and voracious’ accumulation, Fanon urged the newly liberated nations to take a different track, and above all to resist the temptation ‘to catch up with Europe’ (1963 [1961], p. 321). That continent lives at ‘a mad, reckless pace’ – having ‘shaken off all reason’ it is running ‘headlong into the abyss’ (Fanon 1963 [1961], p. 312; Zeilig 2015).

Headlong growth was the hallmark of many of the ‘communist’ societies too. They generally followed the Stalinist model in pursuing rapid industrialisation without regard for the environmental cost. China, notably, poured more cement in just two years (2020–2021) than did the US over the entire 20th century. Its per capita carbon emissions, though lower than those of the US, exceed those of both the European Union and of Japan. Yet the ‘communist’ experience is far from monolithic (Dale and Unkovski-Korica 2023). Cuba’s material and energy usage has been markedly less profligate than that of the Soviet Union or China. Why is this? Essentially, it was born of necessity. Much like a war economy – when material consumption and energy imports are constrained – the nation had to ‘make do and mend’.

In its early post-revolution years, economically besieged by the behemoth across the Florida Straits, Havana moved into the Soviet camp. Receiving, in view of its geopolitical situation, unusual largesse from Moscow (Sanchez-Sibony 2022), Cuba could trade sugar for oil at advantageous prices – and it re-exported some oil such that, by the 1980s, oil surpassed sugar as Cuba’s principal hard-currency earner (Perez-Lopez 1987). That meant, however, that when the spigots of cheap oil and fertilisers switched off following Comecon’s collapse, Cuba’s economy had to turn on a dime. A notable adaptation was the turn to agroecology and organic farming, with its lower energy and fertiliser requirements. Alongside these material, war-economic factors, Cuba’s ecosocialist policies and rhetoric arguably reflect the anti-imperialist commitments of the 1957–1959 revolution that had brought Fidel Castro to power. During the ‘age of ecology’ that dawned shortly after that revolution, Castro became known on the world stage for speeches that castigated the rich world for its environmentally ruinous and unjust policies and consumption habits (Castro 2022 [1992]).

### **Red-green emergence and planetary emergency**

The Age of Ecology can be variously dated. It is generally considered to have commenced with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, drawing attention to the ecocide perpetrated by the chemical and agricultural industries (Radkau 2014). An alternative date would be the public response to radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons testing in the 1940s and 1950s, and the recognition that in the nuclear age humanity was developing the technological capacity to destroy its natural conditions (Foster 2020). Either way, these and other ecocidal acts globalised and intensified, during the ‘Great Acceleration’.

In grappling with the increasingly troubling onslaught of capitalist economy on the biosphere, the output of ecosocialist ideas accelerated rapidly too, authored by non-Marxists – Karl Polanyi

(Dale 2021) and Ernst Schumacher deserve mention – and by Marxists, including Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, André Gorz (1980 [1975]), Raymond Williams, Wolfgang Harich, Erich Fromm, Cornelius Castoriadis and Ernest Mandel. Their ideas, when spliced with *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) manifesto and with romantic and religious critiques of industrial modernity, formed the intellectual pre-history of the degrowth movement.

As the environmental movement developed, it diversified, growing liberal, socialist, anarchist, feminist and many other branches. Ecosocialist activists found their natural habitat in labour movements and in environmental justice campaigns – or what Martinez-Alier (2002) calls the ‘environmentalism of the poor’. Ecosocialism’s highwater mark arrived during the worldwide social-movement upturn of the 1960s and 1970s. The context of surging labour militancy and campaigns challenging all manner of injustices, oppression and war, provided soil in which alliances and fusions of ‘green’ and ‘red’ constituencies and campaigns could flourish, exemplified in the ecosocialism of US labour leader Tony Mazzocchi, in Britain in the Lucas plan, and in Australia’s green bans, as ‘red’ activists and methods swung behind ‘green’ goals.

Since those days, the fate of ecosocialism has been determined by three principal developments. One was the retreat of labour radicalism and socialism. The latter underwent gentrification, its discourse becoming more academic (in both senses). Socialism’s presence in anglophone consciousness, according to Google Books ngram viewer (2024), reached a nadir in 2009, returning to a level of mentions last seen in 1885 (although since 2009 the line has picked up somewhat). The second was a deepening of capitalist hegemony, together with a shift from the étatiste forms of the middle quarters of the 20th century to neoliberal regimes. Neoliberal forces set out to sever alliances between labour radicals and greens, by linking environmental regulation – indeed any regulation – with job losses. Environmental campaigns became more dominated by their professional layers, and prone to dismiss working people as uninterested in ‘postmaterial’ values, while ‘green’ parties evolved into managers of neoliberal order.

Third, the world’s environmental crisis intensified exponentially, to the extent that doubts over the future of humanity are now commonly voiced – as is, harking back to the second development, the observation that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This necessitates that the major system-supporting ideologies develop ever more sophisticated strategies of cognitive dissonance and denial. Conservatism traditionally conveyed a concern for protecting existing habitat, for organic and evolutionary change with an aversion to experimentation, yet its adherents have been conducting far and away the greatest experiment with society and with the planet, through the rule of capital. Liberalism, for its part, is known for its meliorist inclinations and yet, on account of its commitment to the sanctity of private property and market economics, its devotees are driving the world towards desertification and desolation. Against this, ecosocialism appeals to principles that reflect the human capacities urgently required in the face of social crisis and environmental ruination, namely solidarity with, and care for the life and habitat of, other humans and other species, in particular those who face oppression or other hindrances. It looks to participatory democracy and economic planning, as institutions through which to re-structure the goal of social production from the never-ending accumulation to human needs. Of the latter, the habitability of the planet – including climate and biodiversity – is far and away the most fundamental.

### **Ecosocialism and degrowth**

At a time when environmental movements are dominated by middle-class layers, and labour movements are dominated by their middle-class bureaucracies, ecosocialism can appear

oxymoronic. In the era of ‘capitalist realism’, class-struggle environmentalism has been subdued (Fisher 2009; Dale 2024). Ecosocialists, like degrowthers, experience the usual dilemma of left-wing activism, to either retain a single-minded focus on the revolutionary horizon or to bind oneself more closely into existing institutions, thereby enabling greater popular reach but with the cost that the ‘minimum programme’ becomes everything, the goal forgotten, or endlessly deferred.

The ecosocialist and degrowth movements challenge one another. The former question degrowthers’ concept of ‘growthism’, arguing that it is better grasped as a product of capitalism, as the capital relation is the fundamental determinant of growth and its ideology. Degrowthers meanwhile, even as they contributed to socialism’s ecological awakening and to ecosocialist thinking on technology, consumption and the ‘manufacture of needs’, catalysed divisions within the ecosocialist camp. Between degrowthers and ecosocialist backers of a Green New Deal, there has been a level of ‘misplaced rivalry’ too (Dale 2019). Liberal degrowthers – who envisage a society of private property, markets, individualism along with the three R’s of ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ – have little in common with ecosocialist collectivism and planning (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018, p. 257; Wilkins and Murphy 2021). At the radical ends of the degrowth and ecosocialist spectrums, however, we find common positions, notably on what Hannah Holleman (2018, p. 162) calls the four R’s of radical environmentalism, namely restoration of earth systems, restitution of lands and sovereignty, reparations for slavery and revolution.

Naturally, given the formative influence of ecosocialists on the degrowth movement, strong affinities connect the two. Many degrowthers look to powerful unions as vital allies in the struggles for a shorter working week, for ‘climate jobs’ programmes within a just transition, wealth redistribution and universal basic services. They recognise that ‘growthism’ is a product of capitalism and acknowledge the conjoined causation of social polarisation and environmental despoliation. Together with degrowthers, many ecosocialists recognise that tackling the intensifying environmental crises requires far more than, say, the nationalisation of energy suppliers and programmes of sectoral transition (in transport, energy supply and so on); it requires, in addition, colossal reductions in energy use and material throughput, at least in the rich world, reductions that, while focused on the highest consumers, will affect working people, too. They jointly envisage a future of ‘public luxury and private sufficiency’, a world in which more affordable housing, building insulation, public transport, clean air and self-governed time would enable the quality of life for the masses to improve immeasurably, even as many consumer goods, notably flights, SUVs and beef, disappear from the menu.

A convergence of the radical fringes of both camps would look to a ‘degrowth-communist’ future, with swingeing degrowth for the tycoon class and the rich, coupled with a ‘revolutionary transformation of labour and production’ to ensure resources be devoted to enabling billions of poor people to access clean water, food and shelter, sanitation and other amenities (Saito 2024, p. 183). Collective decision-making through democratic planning mechanisms at various scales, from the local – workplaces and neighbourhoods – to the global, would replace profit by ecological and human need as the goal of production (Vettese and Pendergrass 2022).

As of the mid-2020s, such aspirations exist largely in the form of system-critique and utopian vision. Should ecosocialism fail, the prospect will be of an exponentially worsening assault by capital on the earth’s biophysical boundaries. It is 165 years since the prospect of climate change-caused human extinction was first broached (Wilson 1858). If global capitalism continues for a span of similar length, all bets would be off, as cascading ecosystem collapse and an acceleration of the Sixth Great Extinction would bring the collective suicide – or is it murder? – of our own extravagantly gifted species into view, and with it, one presumes, a refutation of the anthropocentric ethics that have guided most ecosocialists hitherto.

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