

The Double Objective of Democratic Ecosocialism

Jason Hickel

We face a double crisis as the twenty-first century unfolds. On the one hand, it is an ecological crisis: climate change and several other Earth System pressures are exceeding planetary boundaries to a dangerous extent. On the other hand, it is also a social crisis: several billion people are deprived of access to basic goods and services. More than 40 percent of the

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human population cannot afford nutritious food; 50 percent do not have safely managed sanitation facilities; 70 percent do not have necessary health care.

Deprivation is most extreme in the periphery, where imperialist dynamics of structural adjustment and unequal exchange continue to perpetuate poverty and underdevelopment. But it is evident also in the core: in the United States, nearly half the population cannot afford health care; in the United Kingdom, 4.3 million children live in poverty; in the European Union, 90 million people face economic insecurity. These patterns of deprivation are shot through with brutal inequalities of race and gender.



Alstom Citadis Compact awaiting departure towards Gare d'Aubagne, at its terminus Le Charrel. By [Florian Fèvre](#) - Own work, [CC BY-SA 4.0 Link](#).

No political program that promises to analyse and resolve the ecological crisis can hope to succeed if it does not also simultaneously—that is, in the same stroke—analyse and resolve the social crisis. Attempting to address one without the other leaves fundamental contradictions entrenched and will ultimately give rise to monsters. Indeed, monsters are already emerging.

It is critically important to understand that the dual social-ecological crisis is being driven, ultimately, by the capitalist system of production. The two dimensions are symptoms of the same underlying pathology. By capitalism here, I do not mean simply markets, trade, and businesses, as people often so easily assume. These things existed for thousands of years before capitalism, and are innocent enough on their own. The key defining feature of capitalism that we must confront is that it is, as a condition for its very existence, fundamentally antidemocratic.

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Yes, many of us live in electoral political systems—as corrupt and captured as they may be—where we select political leaders from time to time. But even so, when it comes to the system of production, not even the shallowest illusion of democracy enters. Production is controlled overwhelmingly by capital: large corporations, major financial firms, and the 1 percent who own the lion’s share of investable assets. Capital wields the power to mobilise our collective labor and our planet’s resources for whatever it wants, determining what we produce, under what conditions, and how the surplus we generate shall be used and distributed.

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And let us be clear: for capital, the primary purpose of production is not to meet specific human needs or to achieve social progress, much less to achieve any concrete ecological goals. Rather, the overriding objective is to maximise and accumulate profit.

The result is that the capitalist world-system is characterised by perverse forms of production. Capital directs finance to highly profitable output, like sport utility vehicles, industrial meat, fast fashion, weapons, fossil fuels, and property speculation, while reproducing chronic shortages of necessary goods and services like public transit, public health care, nutritious food, renewable energy, and affordable housing. This dynamic occurs within national economies but also has clear imperialist dimensions. Land, labor, and productive capacities across the Global South are roped into supplying global commodity chains dominated by Northern firms—bananas for Chiquita, cotton for Zara, coffee for Starbucks, smartphones for Apple, and coltan for Tesla, all for the benefit of the core, all at artificially depressed prices—instead of producing food, housing, health care, education, and industrial goods to meet national needs. Capital accumulation in the core depends on draining labor and resources from the periphery.¹

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Despite extremely high levels of aggregate production... deprivation remains widespread. Capitalism produces too much, yes, but also not enough of the right stuff.

¹ ↪ Jason Hickel, Christian Dorninger, Hanspeter Wieland, and Intan Suwandi, “Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy: Drain from the Global South through Unequal Exchange, 1990–2015,” *Global Environmental Change* 73 (2020): 102467.

It should therefore come as no surprise that despite extremely high levels of aggregate production—and levels of energy and material use that are driving ecological pressures well beyond safe and sustainable boundaries—deprivation remains widespread within the capitalist world economy. Capitalism produces too much, yes, but also not enough of the right stuff. Access to essential goods and services is limited by commodification; and because capital seeks to cheapen labor at every opportunity, particularly in the periphery, the consumption of the working classes is constrained.

Peter Kropotkin noticed this dynamic more than 130 years ago. In *The Conquest of Bread*, he observed that despite high levels of production in Europe even in the nineteenth century, most of the population lived in misery. Why? Because under capitalism, production is mobilised around “whatever offers the greatest profits to the monopolists.” “A few rich men,” he wrote, “manipulate the economic activities of the nation.” Meanwhile, the masses, who are prevented from producing for their own needs, “have not the means of subsistence for a month, or even for a week in advance.”

Consider, Kropotkin urged, “all the labour that goes to sheer waste—here, in keeping up the stables, the kennels, and the retinue of the rich; there, in pandering to the caprices of society and the depraved tastes of the fashionable mob; there again, in forcing the consumer to buy what he does not need, or foisting an inferior article upon him by means of puffery, and in producing on the other hand wares which are absolutely injurious, but profitable to the manufacturer.”²

But all of this productive activity could be organised toward other ends. “What is squandered in this manner,” Kropotkin wrote, “would be enough to double the production of useful things, or so to plenish our mills and factories with machinery that they would soon flood the shops with all that is now lacking to two-thirds of the nation.” If the workers and farmers had collective control over the means of production, they easily would be able to ensure what Kropotkin referred to as “well-being for all.” Mass poverty, deprivation, and the artificial scarcities that characterise capitalism could be ended more or less immediately.

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Kropotkin’s argument stands today. It would not take much, as a share of total global productive capacity, to ensure decent lives for everyone on the planet. But with the reality of the ecological crisis, we must also face a second challenge, one that Kropotkin could not appreciate in the nineteenth century: to achieve well-being for all while at the same time reducing aggregate use of energy and materials (specifically in the core) to enable sufficiently rapid

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decarbonisation and to bring the world economy back within planetary boundaries.³ Technological innovation and efficiency improvements are crucial to this, but high-income countries also need to scale down less-necessary forms of production in order to reduce excess energy and material use directly.⁴

² ↪ Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), marxists.org.

³ ↪ Jason Hickel, Daniel W. O’Neill, Andrew L. Fanning, and Huzaifa Zoomkawala, “National Responsibility for Ecological Breakdown: A Fair-Shares Assessment of Resource Use, 1970–2017,” *Lancet Planetary Health* 6, no. 4 (2022): e342–e349; Jason Hickel, “Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown: An Equality-Based Attribution Approach for Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Excess of the Planetary Boundary,” *Lancet Planetary Health* 4, no. 9 (2022): e399–e404; Lorenz T. Keyßer and Manfred Lenzen, “1.5°C Degrowth Scenarios Suggest the Need for New Mitigation Pathways,” *Nature Communications* 12, no. 1 (2021): 2676; Jason Hickel et al., “Urgent Need for Post-Growth Climate Mitigation Scenarios,” *Nature Energy* 6, no. 8 (2021): 766–68. A free PDF of this article is available at jasonhickel.org/research.

⁴ ↪ Jason Hickel, “On Technology and Degrowth,” — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023; Jefim Vogel and Jason Hickel, “Is Green Growth Happening?: Achieved vs. Paris-compliant CO₂-GDP Decoupling in High-Income Countries,” *Lancet Planetary Health* (2023), forthcoming).

If capitalism has always been unable to achieve the former goal (well-being for all), it most certainly cannot achieve the latter. It is a structural impossibility, as it runs against the core logic of the capitalist economy, which is to increase aggregate production indefinitely, to maintain the conditions for perpetual accumulation.

It is clear what needs to be done: we must achieve democratic control over finance and production, as Kropotkin argued, and now organise it around the double goal of well-being and ecology. This requires that we distinguish, as Kropotkin did, between the socially necessary production that clearly needs to increase for social progress, and the destructive and less-necessary forms of production that urgently need to be scaled down. This is the revolutionary world-historical objective that faces our generation.

What would such an economy look like? Several key objectives stand out.

To secure the social foundation, first we must expand and decommodify universal public services.⁵ By this I mean health care and education, yes, but also housing, public transit, energy, water, Internet, child care, recreation facilities, and nutritious food for all. Let us mobilise our productive forces to ensure everyone has access to the goods and services necessary for well-being.

Second, we must establish ambitious public works programs, to build renewable energy capacity, insulate homes, produce and install efficient appliances, restore ecosystems, and innovate socially necessary and ecologically efficient technologies. These are essential interventions that must be done as quickly as possible; we cannot wait around for capital to decide they are worth doing.

Third, we must introduce a public job guarantee, empowering people to participate in these vital collective projects, doing meaningful, socially necessary work with workplace democracy and living wages. The job guarantee must be financed by the currency issuer but should be democratically governed at the appropriate level of locality.

Consider the power of this approach. It allows us to achieve ecologically necessary objectives. But it also abolishes unemployment. It abolishes economic insecurity. It ensures good lives for all, regardless of fluctuations in aggregate output, thus de-linking well-being from growth. As for the rest of the economy, private firms should be democratised and brought under worker and community control as appropriate, and production should be reorganised around the objectives of well-being and ecology.

Next, as we secure and improve the socially and ecologically necessary sectors, we also need to scale down socially less-necessary forms of production. Fossil fuels are obvious here: we need binding targets to wind this industry down, in a fair and just way.⁶ But—as degrowth scholarship points out—we also need to reduce aggregate production in other destructive industries (automobiles, airlines, mansions, industrial meat, fast fashion, advertising, weapons, and so on),

⁵ ↪ Jason Hickel, "[Universal Public Services: The Power of Decommodifying Survival](#)," MR Online, April 21, 2023.

⁶ ↪ See, for example, the [Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative](#).

while extending product lifespans and banning planned obsolescence. This process should be democratically determined, but also grounded in the material reality of ecology and the imperatives of decolonial justice.⁷

Finally, we urgently need to cut the excess purchasing power of the rich using wealth taxes and maximum income ratios.⁸ Right now millionaires alone are on track to burn 72 percent of the remaining carbon budget to keep the planet under 1.5°C of warming.⁹ This is an egregious assault on humanity and the living world, and none of us should accept it. It is irrational and unjust to continue diverting our energy and resources to supporting an overconsuming elite in the middle of an ecological emergency.

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If, after taking these steps, we find that our society requires less labor to produce what we need, we can shorten the working week, give people more free time, and share necessary labor more evenly, thus permanently preventing any unemployment.

The internationalist dimension of this transition must be front and center. Excess energy and material use must decline in the core to achieve ecological objectives, while in the periphery productive capacities must be reclaimed, reorganised, and, in many cases, increased to meet human needs and achieve development, with throughput converging globally to levels that are sufficient for universal well-being and compatible with ecological stability.¹⁰ For the Global South, this requires ending structural adjustment programs, canceling external debts, ensuring universal availability of necessary technologies, and enabling governments to use progressive industrial and fiscal policy to improve economic sovereignty. In the absence of effective multilateral action, Southern governments can and should take unilateral or collective steps toward sovereign development and should be supported toward this end.¹¹

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As all of this should make clear, degrowth—the framework that has cracked open the imagination of scientists and activists over the past decade—is best understood as an element within a broader struggle for ecosocialism and anti-imperialism.

⁷ ↪ We know from citizens' assemblies in the United Kingdom, France, and Spain that people can quickly identify less-necessary forms of production and agree to reduce them. We also know that under experimental conditions people seek to manage resources in just and ecological ways (confirming research by Eleanor Ostrom and others on democratic commons management); see Oliver P. Hauser, David G. Rand, Alexander Peysakhovich, and Martin A. Nowak, "Cooperating with the Future," *Nature* 511, no. 7508 (2014): 220–23. Democracy is a key socialist value but so are science (that is, positions should be empirically robust with respect to material and ecological reality), justice, and solidarity. If people in the core democratically decide to increase their use of energy and materials in ways that exacerbate ecological breakdown and/or harm people in the periphery, socialists should object and argue/organize for a change of course.

⁸ ↪ Joel Millward-Hopkins and Yannick Oswald, "Reducing Global Inequality to Secure Human Wellbeing and Climate Safety," *Lancet Planetary Health* 7, no. 2 (2023): e147–e154. See also Jason Hickel, "How Much Should Inequality Be Reduced?," Al Jazeera, December 14, 2022, aljazeera.com.

⁹ ↪ Stefan Gössling and Andreas Humpe, "Millionaire Spending Incompatible with 1.5°C Ambitions," *Cleaner Production Letters* 4 (2023): 100027.

¹⁰ ↪ Hickel, O'Neill, Fanning, and Zoomkawala, "National Responsibility for Ecological Breakdown"; Hickel, "Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown"; Keyßer and Lenzen, "1.5°C Degrowth Scenarios Suggest the Need for New Mitigation Pathways"; Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan, "Capitalism, Global Poverty, and the Case for Democratic Socialism," — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2023.

¹¹ ↪ Jason Hickel, "How to Achieve Full Decolonization," *New Internationalist*, October 15, 2021; Samir Amin, *Delinking: Toward a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1980).

Is the program outlined above affordable? Yes. By definition, yes. As even the influential capitalist economist John

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Maynard Keynes acknowledged—and as socialist economists have always understood—anything we can actually do, in terms of productive capacity, we can pay for. And when it comes to productive capacity, we have far more than enough. By establishing democratic control over finance and production, we

can simply shift the use of this capacity away from wasteful production and elite accumulation to achieve social and ecological objectives.

Some will say this sounds utopian. But these policies happen to be extremely popular. Universal public services, a public job guarantee, more equality, an economy focused on well-being and ecology rather than growth—polls and surveys show strong majority support for these ideas, and official citizens' assemblies in several countries have called for precisely this kind of transition. This has the potential to become a popular and feasible political agenda.

But none of this will happen on its own. It will require a major political struggle against those who benefit so prodigiously from the status quo. This is not a time for mild reformism, tweaking around the edges of a failing system.

It is clear that the environmentalist movement that has mobilised over the past several years cannot serve as the sole agent of this change... it is urgent for environmentalists to build alliances with the unions, the labor movements, and other working-class political formations.

This is a time for revolutionary change. It is clear, however, that the environmentalist movement that has mobilised over the past several years cannot serve as the sole agent of this change. While the movement has succeeded in bringing ecological problems to the forefront of public discourse, it lacks the structural analysis and political leverage to achieve the necessary transition. The bourgeois green parties are

particularly egregious, with their dangerous inattention to the question of working-class livelihoods, social policy, and imperialist dynamics. To overcome these limitations, it is urgently important for environmentalists to build alliances with the unions, the labor movements, and other working-class political formations that have much more political leverage, including the power of the strike.

To do this, environmentalists must foreground the social policies I have listed above, organising to abolish the economic insecurity that leads working-class communities and many unions to fear the negative ramifications that radical ecological action may otherwise have on their livelihoods. But the unions also need to move. I say this not as a critic from the outside, but as a lifelong union member. How did we ever let the political horizons of the labor movement shrink down to industry-specific battles over wages and conditions, while leaving the general structure of the capitalist economy intact? We must revive our original ambitions and unite across sectors—as well as with the unemployed—to secure the social foundation for all and achieve economic democracy.

Finally, progressive movements in the core must unite with, support and defend radical and anticolonial social movements in the Global South. The workers and peasants of the periphery contribute 90 percent of the labor that fuels the capitalist world economy, and the South holds the majority of the world's arable land and critical resources, which places substantial leverage in their hands. Any political philosophy that does not foreground Southern workers and political movements as leading agents of revolutionary change is simply missing the point.

This requires the hard work of organising, establishing solidarities, and uniting around common political demands. It requires strategy, and it requires courage. Is there hope? Yes. We know it is empirically possible to achieve a just and

sustainable world economy. But our hope can only ever be as strong as our struggle. **If we want hope—if we want to win such a world—we must build the struggle.**

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