

## The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject and the Possibilities of System Change

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**T**he latest reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) indicate a subtle but significant shift among many of the world's scientists. At the same time as the environmental and biotic crises have grown more pronounced and dangerous, governments, corporations, and related sectors

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have grown increasingly intransigent. Fortunately, both the IPCC and IPBES have gone beyond calling for economic and market reforms. The IPBES stresses the importance of “a fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.” The IPCC highlights that “the move towards climate-resilient societies requires transformational or deep systemic change.”<sup>1</sup>



Illustration of the Paris Commune adapted from the century edition of Cassell's History of England, (ca. 1900)

<sup>1</sup> ↪ IPBES, “Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services” (Bonn: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019), 14; IPCC, “Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change,” *WGIII Sixth Assessment Report* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022), TS-133. On state attempts to censor the scientific consensus on the IPCC report, see Editors, “Notes from the Editors on Time is Running Out” – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2022.

These statements do not mean that the majority of scientists have begun to openly advocate revolutionary politics or even a substantial break with the capitalist system. The “transformative change” proposed in the scientific reports is ambiguous and coupled with strategies that presuppose the existing institutional framework in which the state operates over and against civil society. Nonetheless, the shift in attitude here is significant inasmuch as it is symptomatic of a growing recognition of the need for an alternative to capital’s alienated, totalising, and structurally uncontrollable mode of alienated domination over the material and energy—that is, metabolic—flows associated with the mutually constitutive processes of social reproduction.

István Mészáros conceptualises the present conjuncture as a structural crisis that is superimposed on capital’s cyclical

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crises and brought on in the 1970s by the activation of the absolute limits set by the system’s “innermost structural determinations of its mode of social metabolic control.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the pursuit of even minor reforms tends quickly to lead to direct confrontations with deeply entrenched structural powers and interests. This intransigence generates new opportunities for the socialist movement to build a broad coalition of radical politics,

but also prompts capital to more quickly push humanity closer to the edge of destruction.

The only way to prevent this structural crisis from continuing to threaten humanity with imminent extinction is to abolish not just capitalism as the political command structure, but capital as “the social metabolic regulator of the material reproduction process,” and replace it with an alternative, non-adversarial system at all levels. This is a much more profound challenge than a political revolution, as it entails entirely replacing one organic system of alienated mediations that are mutually reinforcing but riven by contradictions with other reproductive relations in which un alienated mediations are mutually reinforcing and open. Moreover, the difficulty is magnified by the extremely compressed

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timescale on which it must be accomplished.<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre aptly captures this challenge in its urgency when he argues that “there is nothing closer and more urgent” than an “impossible-possible (that is, possibility, necessity and impossibility)” constituting total planetary revolution in all

spheres.<sup>4</sup> While such a revolution must ultimately extend over a timescale measured in decades or centuries, it also must commence here and now.<sup>5</sup>

Many people are already convinced of the need for an alternative to capital, but little consensus exists as to what exactly this might entail. The aforementioned scientific reports offer some qualitative and quantitative insights into the baseline conditions needed to render an alternative social arrangement sufficiently sustainable to minimise risks of catastrophic disruptions in vital biospheric processes. They do not, however, even pretend to offer the blueprints for such alternatives, focusing instead on feasible policy and behavioural adjustments to existing institutions and social relations. Nonetheless, alternatives are right now being constructed around the principles of self-determination, substantive equality, and

<sup>2</sup> ↪ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (London: Merlin, 1995), 145.

<sup>3</sup> ↪ István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 145–49.

<sup>4</sup> ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 187.

<sup>5</sup> ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “*The Long Ecological Revolution*,” – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, March 2019.

sustainability—the necessary components of an alternative social metabolic order.<sup>6</sup> Rather than the industrial proletariat, Indigenous and local communities throughout the world have been leading the way in the development of the *communitarian revolutionary subject*.

## The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject and the Project of Alternative Social-Ecological Metabolic Configurations

### *Capital and the Production of Social-Ecological Metabolic Configurations*

The capitalist mode of production, in the sense that Karl Marx employed the term, refers to more than capitalism as a political-economic phenomenon. The capital system, although governed by the accumulation of capital, is best comprehended as a system of social metabolic reproduction that controls the flows of resources and energy through different aspects of social reproduction. Productive and reproductive labor constitute key points mediating this social metabolism with the universal metabolism of nature.<sup>7</sup> Capital's self-expansory constitution drives it to extend its alienated second-order mediations throughout all aspects of the social metabolism, subsuming it and altering its rate,

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volume, technical composition, and *spatio-temporal* configuration in ways that consistently generate ruptures or rifts within the universal metabolism of nature—that is, metabolic rift.<sup>8</sup> Under the imperative to accumulate capital, competing firms turn efficiency gains in the use of material and energy to the more efficient pursuit of capital

accumulation, rather than reductions in or (social) rationalisation of metabolic throughput. With the advance of monopoly-finance capital, this need to pursue compound growth has shifted capital's dynamic in favor of the increasingly wasteful and destructive production of commodities inimical to any rational conception of social needs.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneously, the state has assumed an increasingly central and essential role in reproducing capitalist relations of

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production without mastering their contradictions and achieving the desired coherence, such that capital is now dependent on the state for survival and growth even as the state's attempts to bolster capital yield diminishing returns.<sup>10</sup> The capitalist state therefore

constitutes a central node of political command in capital's system of social metabolic control, but does not exhaust this system, which extends both through and beyond the state deep into the soil of everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ↪ As Mészáros argues, the restoration of capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its partial restoration in China point to these criteria necessary to develop the Marxist project into a hegemonic socialist alternative to capital as the prevailing mode of social metabolic control and ensure the complete eradication of capital from the social metabolism.

<sup>7</sup> ↪ Productive labor or activity as a provider of use values necessary to social reproduction and mediation of the social metabolism with the universal metabolism of nature would, conceptually, include reproductive labor as a central category. However, capital redefines productive as that which generates exchange value, excluding social reproductive labor while including socially destructive labor. See John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022); John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020); István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); Brian M. Napoletano et al., "Making Space in Critical Environmental Geography for the Metabolic Rift," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109, no. 6 (2019): 1811–28.

<sup>9</sup> ↪ Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); John Bellamy Foster, *The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014); Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 170–87.

<sup>10</sup> ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1976); Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 68–70.

<sup>11</sup> ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2014); István Mészáros, *Beyond Leviathan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 119, 144, 168, 211, 242–44.

The concept of social-ecological metabolic configuration highlights the manner in which the social metabolism is a territorial-geographical-spatial-temporal process inscribed in the physical landscape (for example, in infrastructures for agriculture, resource extraction, communication, transport, and so on). That this is a metabolic, rather than merely geographical configuration, however, indicates that it is not reducible to the physical landscape (or cannot be exhausted by an inventory of things in space), as it also entails social, cultural, and economic practices and institutions (for instance, property regimes, territoriality, division of labor). As capital's social-ecological metabolic configuration is oriented to the compound accumulation of value rather than the equitable provision of social wealth, it is replete with ecological rifts that have developed with the intense worldwide integration of exchange relations into the interlinked planetary rifts of the Anthropocene crisis.

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## The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject and the Production of Sustainable Social-Ecological Metabolic Configurations

The communitarian revolutionary subject is a project of collective life, linked to new forms of social and political praxis—other realities, other rationalities.<sup>12</sup> It is an active creator of new relations of production designed to improve community and individual welfare. Although these relations are the product of generations of resistance against colonisation and modernising assimilation, they are constantly being transmitted through evolving traditions that modify values and collective goals, reaffirmed and reconfigured by custom. As part of this evolution, “being Indigenous” has become an important issue for the success of movements, the acceptance of social demands, and the forging of alliances, as well as the transformation of economic, political, social, and ecological spaces.

*The Indigenous and peasant communities challenging the capitalist system tend to share both a close bond to the land and a strong sense of shared community and territorial identity. Such subjects establish their productive systems by defining a deep, reciprocal bond with the rest of nature that emphasises caregiving rather than the accumulation of wealth, plan and manage their economic surplus (both monetary and non-market use values) collectively on the basis of reciprocity and mutual aid, and seek to govern themselves autonomously rather than operate within the parameters set by the capitalist state.<sup>13</sup>*

In the struggles to create a more just and sustainable society, the communitarian revolutionary subject must confront and transform the dominant social-ecological metabolic configuration that is generating today's multiple crises and, most particularly, the social injustices that characterise today's globalised world. In the process, the communitarian

<sup>12</sup> ↪ David Barkin and Alejandra Sánchez, “The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject,” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 8 (2020): 1421–41.

<sup>13</sup> ↪ Este profundo arraigo a la tierra y a su entorno ha caracterizado a los pueblos de todo el mundo desde tiempos inmemoriales. Existe una plétora de materiales documentales y literarios que dan testimonio de esta profunda conexión. Para una descripción reciente y exhaustiva del florecimiento de las sociedades no estatales a lo largo de unos treinta milenios de historia humana y una amplia bibliografía, véase David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021). Véase también Jeff Corntassel, “Life Beyond the State,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 2021, no. 1 (2021): 71–97; James Fenelon and Jennifer Alford, “Envisioning Indigenous Models for Social and Ecological Change in the Anthropocene,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 26, no. 2 (2020): 372–99; Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves* (Huichin, ceded Ohloe land: North Atlantic, 2022); Tero Mustonen et al. (eds.), “Compendium of Indigenous Knowledge and Local Knowledge” (Kontiolahti: Snowchange Cooperative, 2021); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

revolutionary subject becomes actively involved in reorganising the community's productive and environmental management processes to consider what is conceivable, given the natural legacy with which it has been endowed, the full participation of all of its members, and the possibilities of cooperation and exchange with other participants in the alliances that they forge. Just as important, however, are the cosmogonies and cosmovisions of these peoples, their belief systems, and embedded knowledges that define their relations with their surroundings and the planet, and which are explicitly recognised and play a significant part in shaping their institutions and behaviour.<sup>14</sup> These new social-ecological metabolic configurations are pointing the way to overcome many of the dire consequences generated by the larger society in which they must exist. At the same time, they sometimes impose complex limits on the approaches that each communitarian revolutionary subject is able to generate in offering proposals for their localities.

One of the key conceptual strengths of the communitarian revolutionary subject is that it foregrounds issues of space-time and territory and their role in the mediation of the social metabolism with the universal metabolism of nature. This is well expressed in the concept of social-ecological metabolic configuration, which builds on Joan Martínez Alier and

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Jordi Roca Jusmet's conception of ecological economics as a field that "studies the social metabolism, and therefore accounts for the energy flows and material cycles in the human economy, analyses the discrepancies between economic and biogeochemical time, and also studies the co-evolution of species (and agricultural varieties) with humans. The basic object of study is the ecological

(in)sustainability of the economy, without recourse to a single type of value expressed in a single *numeraire*."<sup>15</sup> In contrast, a Latin American formulation of this field of inquiry—radical ecological economics—focuses on the ways in which the communitarian revolutionary subjects in the Global South are restructuring their social-ecological metabolic configurations in consonance with the planetary boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

The agency of the communitarian revolutionary subject, in this sense, is expressed as the ability of this subject to force openings for and implement alternative, socially and ecologically sustainable social-metabolic configurations. The

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communitarian revolutionary subjects, in their capacity to visualise and implement alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations, represent a force capable of confronting and transforming the

metabolic rifts of the capitalist mode of social metabolic control.

<sup>14</sup> ↩ Cosmovision refers to the approach of many peoples to interpret their existence as communities embedded in the natural world. According to Gabriel Espinosa, it is a "delicate and very complex explanatory model" that codifies the structure and functioning of "the human body, society, with its history, and nature." In contrast, in modern agricultural, and especially urban-industrial societies, the natural world and social complexity are significantly less important in shaping belief systems. Gabriel Espinosa, "El Medio Natural como Estructurador de la cosmovisión: El caso mexicana," *Cuicuilco* 2, no. 6 (1996): 51–74.

<sup>15</sup> ↩ Joan Martínez Alier and Jordi Roca Jusmet, *Economía ecológica y política ambiental* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013), 18.

<sup>16</sup> ↩ David Barkin, "¿Porque Economía Ecológica Radical?," *Revista Iberoamericana de Economía Ecológica* 35 (2022): 1–20; David Barkin, "Relating Social Structures to the Planet," *Annuaire Roumain d'Anthropologie* 54, no. 1 (2017): 109–66. Ulrich Brand et al. phrased it this way: "Collective autonomy and the politics of self-limitation are key elements of societal boundaries and are linked to important proposals and pluriverse experiences to integrate well-being and boundaries." Ulrich Brand et al., "From Planetary to Societal Boundaries," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 17, no. 1 (2021): 264–91.

## The World from which the Communitarian Revolutionary Subject Is Attempting to Move

Importantly, the emergence and global dominance of capital as a system of metabolic control is constitutively imbricated with the ongoing project of settler colonialism. Just as each required the other at the start, the successful abolition of one today requires the simultaneous abolition of the other. While the genocidal conquest inflicted by imperial powers of the North Atlantic on the peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas increasingly receives formal acknowledgment as a historic event, this is often enough coupled with an inability to connect the past to the present. That is, colonialism is isolated from capital and shifted to a history detached from the present and therefore denied as an ongoing project upon which capital accumulation and our current social-ecological crises pivot.<sup>17</sup> Hillary Clinton's response to African discussions of compensation for colonialism succinctly exemplifies this portrayal and its ideological function: "For goodness sakes, this is the 21st century. We've got to get over what happened 50, 100, 200 years ago and let's make money for everybody."<sup>18</sup>

The destruction of a society entails the destruction of its cosmovision, including its material and ideological relationship with the rest of its surroundings and with the planet. From the perspective of capital, such destruction is a necessary step

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in establishing the conditions for capitalist production and accumulation—nature as a readily expropriated "free gift" that can be divided into private property, and society as a collection of autonomous and exploitable individuals. When turned against the feudal societies in which capital incubated, this destruction represents, in some ways, an advance. However, in the colonised world, the "negative, i.e. destructive side" has far outweighed the positive, as the expropriated wealth—save that portion siphoned off by the

rentier bourgeoisies—is channeled into the metropolises.<sup>19</sup> Today's globalised world continues ravaging the planet and all of its creatures: extractivism now extends far beyond the continental limits to plunder the oceans' depths; peoples around the world are being subjected to ever new forms of slavery, tied to the machines in far more draconian ways than ever conceived of by the architects of the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. Societies are rent asunder as the desperate race for new forms of accumulation invade the inner reaches of the most inaccessible corners of the globe.

Through their renewed and ongoing struggles over land and territorial return, defence, and self-determination, numerous Indigenous, peasant, and other social movements have been identifying and articulating these connections between capital, settler-colonialism, and social-ecological destruction.<sup>20</sup> As much as Clinton and other representatives of capital and the state would like for the colonised to just "get over it" and resign themselves to the political, economic, and social injustices they face, history is tending in rather the opposite direction. Peasant and campesino organisations such as La Vía Campesina have mobilised small-scale and subsistence farmers throughout the Global South, and even in parts

<sup>17</sup> ↪ Nancy Fraser, "From Exploitation to Expropriation," *Economic Geography* 94, no. 1 (2018): 1–17.

<sup>18</sup> ↪ Andrew Quinn, "[Clinton: Africa Must Launch Tough Economic Reforms](#)," Reuters, June 14, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), 639. See also Samir Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 3 (July–August 2015): 23–36; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2005); Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> ↪ Walden Bello, *The Food Wars* (London: Verso, 2009); John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Marx and the Indigenous," – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2023; Red Nation, *The Red Deal* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

*As not only the mere possibility, but also the urgent necessity of cooperative, sustainable, and substantively equal social-metabolic arrangements becomes increasingly apparent, philosophical approaches [from the Global South] have gained prominence. These approaches provide examples of alternative cosmovisions to the desiccated and mutilated corpse of humanism offered by the North Atlantic.*

of the North Atlantic, against a renewed cycle of aggressive land-grabbing. Similarly, Indigenous movements that have been struggling for centuries to re-assert or defend their territorial autonomy have recently gained increased attention—such as in the case of Indigenous struggles against the construction of fossil-fuel infrastructure—as the broader implications of their struggles become more apparent. Even in the center of metropolitan capital, the regime of racial

capitalism briefly encountered its nemesis in the Black Lives Matter uprising, while the MeToo movement continues its attack on the institutional impunity undergirding an overwhelmingly patriarchal society.

As not only the mere possibility, but also the urgent necessity of cooperative, sustainable, and substantively equal social-metabolic arrangements becomes increasingly apparent, philosophical approaches such as *Vikalp Sangam* in India, *Ubuntu* in South Africa, *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay*) in the Andean countries of South America, and *Comunalidad* in Oaxaca, Mexico, have gained prominence. These approaches provide examples of alternative cosmovisions to the desiccated and mutilated corpse of humanism offered up by the North Atlantic. They are the inklings of the “new humanism” that Lefebvre (like Frantz Fanon) anticipated, but arising not just in the urban metropolises of the North Atlantic, but primarily in the fields and barrios of the Global South, a new humanism that “is written into the objectives and methods of the struggle.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike the post-humanist imaginings of various intellectuals, these cosmovisions do not entail a rejection of the liberatory possibilities of the humanist tradition, but their realisation through the transcendence of their North Atlantic epistemological framing.<sup>22</sup>

## The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject and the Problem of Transition

A central demand of the communitarian revolutionary subject in these instances has been that of autonomy: territorial, political, social, economic, cultural—total. This represents a fundamental challenge to the totalising project of the capitalist system and its settler-state formations, and as such a point of constant struggle. Thus, the communitarian revolutionary subject does not operate in complete isolation from global capitalist society, but nor is it entirely subsumed

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within it. Often, the principle of autonomy translates into strategic engagement with the state and capital. Although much of the communitarian revolutionary subject’s economic activity is structured around solidarity, mutual aid, and reciprocity rather than the capital-wage labor-land antagonism, members of such communities also engage in capitalist market exchanges both individually and

collectively, including the sale of labor power and the purchase of commodities, such as necessities, that the community is unable to obtain through other means. In this sense, the degree of autonomy the communitarian revolutionary subject is able to obtain depends on how adept the community is at satisfying its needs at the margins or outside of commodity exchange, due either to a fairly modest demand for material wealth, abundant access to means of subsistence and the material resources from which they are produced that have not been expropriated by capital, or both.

<sup>21</sup> ↪ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1967), 1; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 148; Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 377.

<sup>22</sup> ↪ David Barkin, “Shaping a Communitarian Ethos in an Era of Ecological Crisis,” *Frontiers in Sustainability* 3 (2022): 944252; Red Nation, *The Red Deal*.

Similarly, when negotiating its autonomy with the state, the communitarian revolutionary subject often appeals to legislation and precedents associated with the state such as those in the International Labour Organization Convention 169, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and often channels these appeals through existing state institutions.<sup>23</sup> The primary strategy of communities is thus to pursue “negotiation strategies, alliances and agreements to consolidate legal frameworks that allow them to expand their autonomy and territorial surplus management on the margins of the sphere of state action.”<sup>24</sup> In short, the communitarian revolutionary subject’s focus on autonomy reflects the necessity of a negotiated coexistence and at the same time potentially adversarial relation with capital and the state, at least inasmuch as capital and the state are willing to permit this.

This places the communitarian revolutionary subject somewhat in tension with the Marxist project of total social transformation—an issue that remains a point of friendly contention between the two authors of this essay. We therefore do not pretend to offer a definitive resolution to this tension, but instead identify three aspects of the communitarian revolutionary subject and its relationship to the socialist project of transformation that merit further discussion and debate.

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The first aspect is the challenge that the communitarian revolutionary subject poses to the logic and territorial aspirations of capital. The IPBES reports that “Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities” presently administer territories over 25 percent of the world’s land, such that the territorial struggles of the communitarian revolutionary subject are of direct concern to any efforts to address the Anthropocene crisis.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the communitarian revolutionary subject confronts the capitalist system with a hard limit to capital’s inherently totalling ambition to seize complete control over all of humanity’s social metabolism. Structuring alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations around criteria of

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use value, concern for nonhuman nature, reciprocity and solidarity, and autonomy contradicts the totalising imperative of capital as a mode of social metabolic control, and threatens to undermine its legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> As capital is constitutionally driven to transform boundaries into barriers and demolish them, this implies a constant struggle against both the infiltration of the community by capitalist relations of production and expropriation of the community’s territory and the resources therein which capital covets.

This conflict is further exacerbated by the manner in which the territorial autonomy, on which the communitarian revolutionary subject’s pursuit of alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations is premised, contradicts the

<sup>23</sup> ↪ Barkin and Sánchez, “The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject”; “Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention” (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1989); United Nations, *The Core International Human Rights Treaties* (New York: United Nations, 2006); “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” (Geneva: United Nations General Assembly, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> ↪ Barkin and Sánchez, “The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject”: 1433.

<sup>25</sup> ↪ IPBES, *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, 77–78. The Indigenous Community and Conservation Areas Consortium brings together a substantial number of these peoples in more than eighty-six countries; they occupy more than one-quarter of the planet’s land area, containing as much as 80 percent of its biodiversity. See Stephen Garnett et al., “A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation,” *Nature Sustainability* 1, no. 7 (2018): 369–74. See [iccaconsortium.org](http://iccaconsortium.org) and the 2021 report, *Territories of Life*.

<sup>26</sup> ↪ A recent example of this challenge to the prevailing approach to a local water management crisis by a community in Mexico is described in Mario Fuente, David Barkin, and Ricardo Clark-Tapia, “Governance from Below and Environmental Justice,” *Ecological Economics*, 160 (2019): 52–61.



state's ideology of territorial sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> As history demonstrates all too often, capital and its states are only willing to negotiate limits under particular circumstances, and only up to a point—the point at which the accumulation of capital is perceived as threatened—before resorting to violence, up to and including outright extermination, to expropriate natural wealth and bolster their hegemony.<sup>28</sup> Thus the communitarian revolutionary subject perpetually confronts a hostile milieu that limits its autonomy and freedom, placing it at the forefront of anticapitalist struggle. Both the ecological implications of territorial struggle and the demands for solidarity with those struggling against capitalist expropriation and exploitation therefore call for the socialist project to engage with the communitarian revolutionary subject.<sup>29</sup>

The second aspect is the prefigurative role of the communitarian revolutionary subject. The communities referred to by this concept are presently refuting the mantra of “There Is No Alternative” in numerous alternative organisations: self-directed social-ecological metabolic configurations operating outside or at the margins of the capitalist system. Inasmuch as these communities are also shaping their social metabolisms around the principles of substantive equality, direct democracy, self-determination, and qualitative as well as quantitative values, the communitarian revolutionary subject is actively pursuing the key demands of socialism in the twenty-first century.

*The various problems that these communities have faced and the different strategies they have employed to address them not only demonstrate humanity's ability to function as a social being outside of capitalist relations of production, but provide valuable insights and a diverse range of solutions with which the socialist project could confront the challenge of “radically altering our modality of social metabolic control by completely eradicating capital from the societal reproduction process.”<sup>30</sup>*

Notably, this prefigurative contribution extends beyond the material dimensions of alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations into the domain of cosmopolitics and a dialectical notion of concrete universality, which is to say, a universality constituted of and defined by a plurality of particularities and specificities.<sup>31</sup> This refers back to the observation that the communitarian revolutionary subject is not guided by a single worldview or ontology, but diverse cosmovisions and notions of humanity and its relationship to the rest of nature. Rather than translating these differences into tribalism or isolationism, however, these communities have increasingly come together to form worldwide networks and alliances, such as Territories of Life and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives.<sup>32</sup> In this, these communities not only

<sup>27</sup> ↪ See Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, “Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory,” *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 353–77; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 279–82; Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1976); Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 74–76, 86–91; Japhy Wilson, “The Devastating Conquest of the Lived by the Concealed,” *Space and Culture* 16, no. 3 (August 2013): 364–80.

<sup>28</sup> ↪ See Daniel Faber, *Environment Under Fire* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993); Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*; Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*.

<sup>29</sup> ↪ See Foster, Clark, and Holleman, “Marx and the Indigenous”; Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, chap. 10.

<sup>30</sup> ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Leviathan*, 244.

<sup>31</sup> ↪ Isabel Stengers, *Power and Invention: Situating Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). This is not the place for an extended debate on universality. The point here is that concrete universality in the Hegelian sense entails the diversity of particulars and specifics as constitutive moments. This sense of universality is perhaps best captured by Ato Sekyi-Otu's notion of “partisan universalism,” building on Fanon, along with Marx, G. W. F. Hegel, and Aimé Césaire. See Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (London: Routledge, 2018); Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Abdel-Shehid Gamal and Noori Sofia, eds., *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu* (Québec: Daraja Press, 2021). As such, it is compatible with, or at the very least not entirely antagonistic to, Arturo Escobar's notion of pluriversality (see his reflections on prefigurative politics in the forward to *The Future Is Now*, ed. Lara Monticelli [Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022], xxii–xxx). For the notion of insurgent universality in decolonial theory, see Massimiliano Tomba, “1793: The Neglected Legacy of Insurgent Universality,” *History of the Present* 5, no. 2 (2015): 109–36 and Japhy Wilson, “The Insurgent Universal,” *Nordia Geographic Publications*, 51, no. 2 (2022): 153–62.

<sup>32</sup> ↪ Carlos Lucio and David Barkin, “Postcolonial and Anti-Systemic Resistance by Indigenous Movements in Mexico,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 28, no. 2 (2022): 293–31.

prefigure, but are actively building in the here and now, what the Zapatistas call “a world in which many worlds fit” at multiple levels.<sup>33</sup>

The third aspect calling for engagement builds on and extends the previous two by returning to the issue of total metabolic revolution. The previous two aspects indicate that the communitarian revolutionary subject must become a key concern to the socialist project even when communities are content to operate at the margins of the capitalist system and negotiate its autonomy with the state. The question of how this could translate into a foundational component of a systemic transformation is best approached by examining the communitarian revolutionary subject in light of Lefebvre’s theorisation of the fundamental challenge of generalised *autogestion*.<sup>34</sup> For Lefebvre, *autogestion* refers to more than self-management, and is closer to what is presently referred to as autonomy and self-determination, but as a global project. He approached this concept from two perspectives, seeing *autogestion* as both a means of struggle within existing society and a means of transforming society from the level of everyday life up through that of the state and globality.<sup>35</sup>

Presaging the communitarian revolutionary subject’s position at the margins of the capitalist system, Lefebvre observes

*Autogestion tends initially to take root not in the key centers of political power, industry, or accumulation, but “in the weak points of existing society,” that is, the cracks or spaces neglected or excluded by state power and capital.*

that *autogestion* tends initially to take root not in the key centers of political power, industry, or accumulation, but “in the weak points of existing society,” that is, the cracks or spaces neglected or excluded by state power and capital.<sup>36</sup> It cannot, however, hope to remain in a defensive posture at these points, but instead points toward a generalisation that “entails the

disruption of society as a whole, the metamorphosis of life.”<sup>37</sup> This generalisation is twofold, in that *autogestion* must extend to all aspects of social life while also occupying “the strong points of a social structure that constantly bridle against it.” Through implementing alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations, the communitarian revolutionary subject has advanced along the first axis, while the formation of worldwide alliances indicates progress along the second.

Multiple factors suggest the necessity of advancing simultaneously along both axes, the most obvious of which being the aforementioned hostility of capital and the state towards such communities, and corresponding threats of subversion or violent subjugation. Over a slightly longer timespan of up to one or two centuries, these threats are compounded by the risk of the capitalist system’s contradictions triggering a nuclear holocaust or ecological disruptions that wipe out all of humanity. Thus, the communitarian revolutionary subject faces the fundamental challenge of social transformation. Rather than an impediment to globality, the communitarian revolutionary subject’s antipathy to state power places it at the center of the inevitable confrontation with power, in which *autogestion* needs “to constitute itself as a power which

<sup>33</sup> ↩ Zapatistas, *Zapatista Encuentro* (New York: Seven Stories, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> ↩ The adjective “generalised” is meant to serve as a corrective to narrower conceptualisations to which a literal translation of *autogestion* as “self-management” may tend, particularly in light of the way that neoliberal ideology has attempted to selectively appropriate and recuperate the concept. See Neil Brenner, “Henri Lefebvre’s Critique of State Productivism,” in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life*, eds. Kanishka Goonewardena et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 231–49; Brian M. Napoletano, Pedro S. Urquijo, Brett Clark, and John Bellamy Foster, “Henri Lefebvre’s Conception of Nature-Society in the Revolutionary Project of Autogestion,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2022); Ed Rose, “Generalised Self-Management,” *Human Relations* 31, no. 7 (1978): 617–30.

<sup>35</sup> ↩ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 149.

<sup>36</sup> ↩ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 144.

<sup>37</sup> ↩ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 147. On the historical need for the socialist movement to shift from a defensive to an offensive posture, see Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 673–80.

is not that of the State.”<sup>38</sup> This simultaneously situates it at Marxism’s central problematic, the withering away of the state.<sup>39</sup>

*This is not to suggest that a strategic approach focusing on the communitarian revolutionary subject’s relation to the challenge of autogestion offers a ready solution to the problem of reconciling the tension between local autonomy and the Marxist project of systemic transformation. As Lefebvre noted, “it should perhaps be emphasised that there is nothing magical about self-management [autogestion] and that it is not a panacea. It has raised and still raises as many problems as it has resolved.”<sup>40</sup> Rather, the point is to demonstrate that the communitarian revolutionary subject is central to any project that hopes to achieve total and lasting system change. The manner in which the communitarian revolutionary subject is engaged in active struggle against the unity of colonialism and capitalism, the degree to which its pursuit of alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations prefigures an alternative social metabolic order, and the ways that its efforts point to a transformative project of autogestion arguably place it at the forefront of the struggle to abolish capital.*

It would be counterproductive at this point to attempt to outline a definitive strategy to move from the communitarian revolutionary subject to total metabolic revolution through generalised *autogestion*, as a viable strategy could only be

*A unified struggle would still “depend fundamentally on the working class(es)—though not so much today on the industrial proletariat as such, but on a wider environmental proletariat, giving rise to a much broader, and at the same time a more cohesive material-ecological revolt.”*

worked out by the subjects themselves in the course of their struggles. However, a realistic path forward would seem to entail uniting the communitarian revolutionary subject with radical social movements in general. Both the Zapatistas’ call to unite all those struggling against oppression and the Red Nation’s “Red Deal” explicitly pursue such a move.<sup>41</sup> Such a unified struggle would still “depend fundamentally on the working class(es)—though not so much today on the industrial proletariat as such,

but on a wider environmental proletariat, giving rise to a much broader, and at the same time a more cohesive material-ecological revolt.”<sup>42</sup> This wider conception of the proletariat as ecological as well as economic also reflects a sharpened material focus on struggles over the conditions of social reproduction and semi-proletarianisation presupposed by capitalist production, allowing for a broader range of revolutionary agency and possibilities than those restricted to the industrial proletariat.<sup>43</sup>

In close concert with anticolonial and anticapitalist struggles in the Global North, much of the leadership in such a movement rooted in the communitarian revolutionary subject would presumably be concentrated in the Global South, given the manner in which colonialism, extractivism, and social-ecological devastation in this region have been

<sup>38</sup> ↩ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 147.

<sup>39</sup> ↩ Both Lefebvre and Mészáros identify this as a *condicio sine qua non* of the Marxist project. Lefebvre: “If ever it were proven that the State could not be made to wither away, that the State is destined to prosper and to flourish until the end of time, then Marxism as a whole would have to jump ship.” Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 72. Mészáros: “Those who deny his [Marx’s] unending conviction regarding the necessary withering away of the state as such, from the time of his early critique of the state, are, knowingly or not, in complete disagreement not only with this one aspect of his conception but with the whole of it.” Mészáros, *Beyond Leviathan*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> ↩ Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 84.

<sup>41</sup> ↩ Red Nation, *The Red Deal*; Zapatistas, *Zapatista Encuentro*.

<sup>42</sup> ↩ Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 398; see also Foster, Clark, and Holleman, “Marx and the Indigenous,” and Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, chaps. 3, 10, and 11.

<sup>43</sup> ↩ Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” *New Left Review* 86 (2014): 55–72.

compounded by international imperialism.<sup>44</sup> Through its centuries of struggle against this perverse unity of oppression and domination, the communitarian revolutionary subject has more than demonstrated its ability to take a place at the front lines of this movement.

The alternative social-ecological metabolic configurations being pursued by the communitarian revolutionary subject coalesce in many ways with the socialist project of the abolition of capital and the withering of the state which overflows the forms in which this project has traditionally been envisioned. The communitarian revolutionary subject operationalises vital aspects of communal production and appropriation of spacetime identified in Lefebvre's theorisation of *autogestion*; recognition of the dialectical interdependence between substantive equality, horizontal democracy, and sustainability emphasised by Mészáros; and leadership emanating from the environmental proletariat of the Global South in the manner posited by the contemporary theorisation of metabolic revolution. Moreover, many of these projects have sought to transcend partiality by coordinating and interlinking horizontally, thereby demonstrating the internationalism to which the socialist movement has aspired. Moreover, it does so in a way that also acknowledges "the dialectical complementarity of the national and the international," which "remains a vital orienting principle of human interchanges in the foreseeable future."<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, embracing the possibilities that these alternatives offer for a total metabolic revolution also requires careful critical reflection that avoids forcing the communitarian revolutionary subject into preexisting categories and roles.

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<sup>44</sup> ↪ Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism"; John Bellamy Foster, "[The Defense of Nature](#)," – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2022.

<sup>45</sup> ↪ Mészáros, The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time, 308.

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