

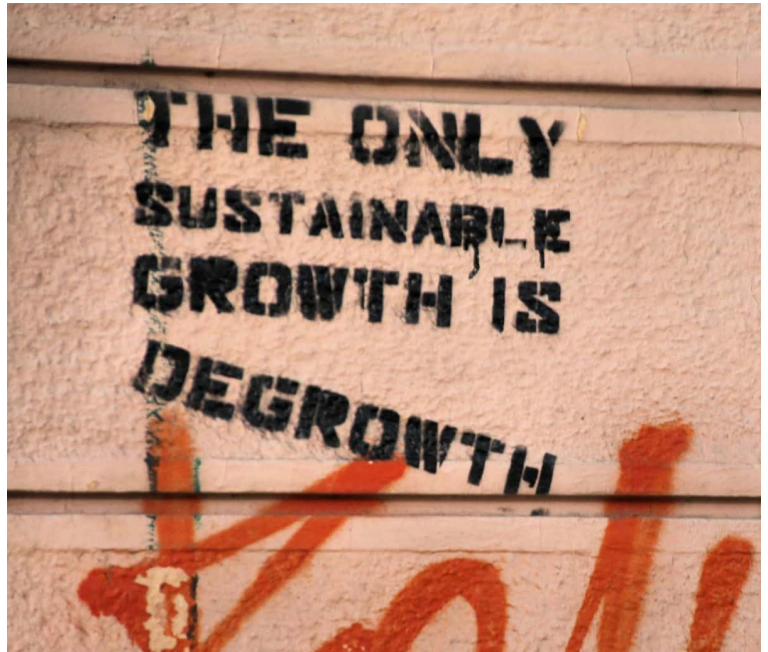


Toward an Ecosocialist Degrowth

From the Materially Inevitable to the Socially Desirable

Alejandro Pedregal and Juan Bordera

We are facing today the most pronounced and remarkable of all contradictions: that between what ecosocialist Ian Angus calls “capital’s time” and “nature’s time.”¹ As a result, a series of intertwined ecological and social crises have come together, posing existential threats to life on the planet. These are manifested at a human level in: (1) the increasing unequal ecological exchange between the Global North and South; (2) growing global socioeconomic inequalities; (3) persistent and threatening health emergencies and environmental disasters; and (4) the multifaceted expressions of the crisis of care.² Everywhere, life, both human and nonhuman, is threatened, and the dangers of the imposition of capital’s time on nature’s time accelerate decade by decade at levels scarcely imaginable.



¹ ↪ Ian Angus, [Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crises of the Earth System](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), 111–25.

² ↪ John Bellamy Foster and Hannah Holleman, “The Theory of Unequal Ecological Exchange: A Marx-Odum Dialectic,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 2 (2014): 199–233; Hannah Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of “Green” Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); John Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism’s Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review, 2016); Jason Hickel, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018); Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science* (New York: Monthly Review, 2016); Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review* 100 (2016): 99–117; Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge

In these frenetic times, we have been able to access the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports leaked months in advance by the scientific community itself, due to scientists' fears that their conclusions would be

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watered down in the process—fears that, unfortunately, were proven correct after the final reports were published.³ At the same time, essential raw materials and some types of plastics have become scarce, while the price of gas, coal, oil, and almost every energy source has skyrocketed due to the complex interactions within the production chain itself (now further

complicated by war in Ukraine).⁴ As the ecological drama continues to escalate, with devastating targets being surpassed every few months, the energy crisis is accelerating with no end in sight, while the breakdown of supply chains is hitting hard all over the world.⁵ Supply chains, embedded into the global labour arbitrage, are also suffering from the breakdown of the just-in-time organisational model. All this exposes the accentuated imperial relations of core and periphery, uncovering the multiplicity of crises produced and reproduced by the global hierarchy, experienced with a special virulence against those super-exploited classes of the Global South, disproportionately feminized and racialised.

Expressions of the Energy Crisis

Despite some recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including economic recovery, everything seems to be more unstable and fragile. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy cases in recent months, although not the only one, has been that of the United Kingdom, with its temporary shortage of gas and shop windows—a sign of scarcity not so long ago

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associated almost exclusively with the Global South, where the trend certainly continues, such as in the recent energy shortages in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, among other places.⁶ Beyond the conjunctural issues, the energy crisis is underpinned by a series of structural aspects that are spreading to all spheres like an oil slick, including one of the most serious: surpassing the peak

of conventional oil—the highest quality—reached in 2005, as recognised by the International Energy Agency (IEA), and the peak of all petroleum liquids at the end of 2018. In addition, the peaks of coal and uranium, and to a lesser extent natural gas, are also exceeded or very close to being exceeded.⁷ Thus, global capital and its hangers-on could continue to look away from the elephant in the room, but its insatiable energy gluttony will eventually crush us if we do not change its diet in time. Additionally, the ongoing climate catastrophe should be enough to generate a call to keep fossil fuels in the ground.

³ ↪ Juan Bordera et al., “Leaked Report of the IPCC Reveals that the Growth Model of Capitalism Is Unsustainable,” MR Online, August 23, 2021; Juan Bordera et al., “How the Corporate Interests and Political Elites Watered Down the World’s Most Important Climate Report,” MR Online, April 27, 2022; Daniel Tanuro, “IPCC WG3 Report: From Scientific Rigor to Social Fable,” *International Viewpoint*, April 16, 2022; Leaked IPCC, *Summary for Policymakers*, Working Group III, August 2021, available at monthlyreview.org.

⁴ ↪ Antonio Turiel and Juan Bordera, “El otoño de la civilización (y la ruptura de la cadena de suministros),” *CTXT—Contexto y Acción*, September 17, 2021.

⁵ ↪ Not surprisingly, it has just been announced that the chemical pollution boundary has been significantly exceeded, making it the fifth of the nine thresholds considered to have the potential to destabilize the planet. The other four are: climate change, biosphere integrity (through biodiversity loss), biogeochemical flows (phosphorus and nitrogen cycles), and land use, with others, such as ocean acidification, highly stressed. Linn Persson et al., “Outside the Safe Operating Space of the Planetary Boundary for Novel Entities,” *Environmental Science and Technology*, January 18, 2022; “Safe Planetary Boundary for Pollutants, Including Plastics, Exceeded, Say Researchers,” Stockholm Resilience Center; Johan Rockström et al., “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature* 461 (2009): 472–75.

⁶ ↪ Antonio Turiel and Juan Bordera, “La crisis que no se quiso ver venir (en Gran Bretaña),” *CTXT—Contexto y Acción*, October 1, 2021; Faseeh Mangi, “Pakistan Is Cutting Electricity to Homes, Industry. It Can’t Afford Fuel,” NDTV, April 18, 2022; “Crisis-Hit Sri Lanka No Longer Has Diesel,” NDTV, March 31, 2022.

⁷ ↪ Antonio Turiel, *Petrocalipsis: Crisis energética global y cómo (no) la vamos a solucionar* (Madrid: Alfabeto, 2020).

Still, even in the context of climate change, the extreme extractivist model continues, with the result that all of the critical factors mentioned are leading to an unprecedented increase in the extraction costs of fossil fuels and most minerals, with the consequent loss in the energy rate on investment.⁸ This further reveals the extreme difficulty in addressing a smooth transition to “clean” energy sources—the energy capacity of which is and will be evidently lower. The challenge is even greater if these ambitious “Great Transformations” are to be carried out simultaneously across the

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world and in all economic sectors. For example, in its report on critical minerals, the IEA has noted that, by 2040, the demand for lithium will have to multiply by forty-two, graphite by twenty-five, cobalt by twenty-one, nickel by nineteen, and rare-earth minerals by seven

times as a result of the expected renewable deployment. Among its recommendations to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries is the build-up of strategic reserves to cope with possible supply disruptions.⁹

If we want to avoid an ecosocial catastrophe with unforeseeable consequences, the longed-for energy transition is the best example of why a coordinated planning policy is more essential than ever. The present globalised monopoly capitalist system has brought us to this existential crossroads. It is essential that it is not allowed to manage the solution, according to the laws of the so-called free market. Yet, the very word planning, despite its absolute necessity given our current social and natural conditions constraints, generates media alarms and is repeatedly denied in almost every Western economics department and government institution—a haunting spectre in its own right.

One must only peruse the IEA’s recent World Energy Outlook to get an idea of the paradoxical responses prompted by any proposal for coordinated planning. Energy downturn is underway, but, in line with hegemonic neoclassical

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postulates, this decline is simply explained on the basis of a peak in demand, leaving aside any ecosocial cause—whether related to the pandemic or other more systemic factors, such as the planetary limits stressed by capitalist production. It is not surprising then that, at the same time the world’s main energy agency is advocating an urgent reduction in the consumption of fossil fuels to face global warming, it is also warning that the

energy decline will be abrupt and terrible if sufficient investment is not made in the extraction and start-up of new deposits.¹⁰

Of course, this kind of schizoid diagnosis within a single report is not unique to the IEA. The leaks from the IPCC Working Group III, which one of us managed to publish in more than thirty countries and which have been the subject of debate in some parliaments, such as in Ireland, suggest that a good part of the scientific community is increasingly fed up with diplomatic compromises that do not call a spade a spade.¹¹ In this sense, the conclusions of the report are striking, especially coming from a body that has not infrequently taken conservative positions in the past.¹² For the first

⁸ ↪ Louis Delannoy, Pierre-Yves Longaretti, David J. Murphy, and Emmanuel Prados, “Peak Oil and the Low-Carbon Energy Transition: A Net-Energy Perspective,” *Applied Energy* 304 (2021).

⁹ ↪ The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions: World Energy Outlook Special Report (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021).

¹⁰ ↪ *World Energy Outlook 2021* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021).

¹¹ ↪ Bordera et al., “Leaked Report of the IPCC Reveals That the Growth Model of Capitalism Is Unsustainable”; Mick Barry TD, [Twitter post](#), September 16, 2021. For the leaked IPCC climate report, see Scientist Rebellion, “[We Leaked the Upcoming IPCC Report!](#),” MR Online, August 27, 2021.

¹² ↪ Keynyn Brysse, Naomi Oreskes, Jessica O’Reilly, and Michael Oppenheimer, “Climate Change Prediction: Erring on the Side of Least Drama?,” *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 1 (2013): 327–37.

In these reports, capitalism finally appears as the main culprit of the environmental catastrophe in which we live, while exposing its logic of infinite growth in a finite world... Yet, it also praises the sustainable development goals—which include objectives that legitimise the quest for infinite economic growth.

time, there appeared not mere abstractions, more or less accurate, about human social complexities or temporalities defined by qualitative technical or technological changes, but rather a focus on a mode of production that determines and rifts the metabolic

relationship between nature and society: capitalism.

In these leaked reports, capitalism finally appears as the main culprit of the environmental catastrophe in which we live, while exposing that its logic of infinite growth in a finite world makes it absolutely incompatible with the geophysical limits of planetary ecosystems. It is on this basis that the report concludes that a certain type of material and economic degrowth is inevitable on a planet that reminds us, ever more insistently and emphatically, that its resource “taps” and waste “sinks” are running out, and that the complexity of the processes that make it sustainable depend on an equilibrium whose rift makes unpredictable the consequences for the production and reproduction of life.¹³ Yet, despite the forcefulness of its prognosis, the IPCC report also praises the sustainable development goals—which include objectives that legitimise the quest for infinite economic growth, or so-called green growth—signalling the heightening of the contradictions of the most established institutional frameworks.

The Accumulation of Ecosocial Crises

If there is one characteristic that unites the accumulated ecosocial crises that we are experiencing today and that will become more acute in the coming decades, it is inequality—both in origin and impact. Study after study, report after report, expresses with absolute clarity that, in this growing metabolic rift between nature and society on which capitalist production rides, the regions with the least responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions are precisely those most affected

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by its consequences. Climate change, as a critical part of the great deterioration of the earth system, is causing increasingly uncontrollable phenomena, including severe droughts, desertification, and changes in rainfall patterns (especially hard in eminently rural societies whose agricultural activity depends on

climatic regularity). These conditions will lead to famines and increasing and uncontrollable migratory movements. Not surprisingly, the Ecological Threat Register 2020 report published by the Institute of Economics and Peace indicates that, as “6.4 billion people live in countries which are exposed to medium to high ecological threats,” an estimated 1.2 billion people are at risk of displacement by 2050.¹⁴

The quest for a climate budget that lowers carbon dioxide concentrations from the current 417 ppm to 350 ppm and keeps the global temperature—without absolute guarantees—below the 1.5°C increase from preindustrial levels, as

¹³ ↪ Bordera et al., “Leaked Report of the IPCC Reveals that the Growth Model of Capitalism Is Unsustainable.” By the time we revised this article, the final IPCC reports had already been published, with significant differences from the leaked versions prompted by the interventions of lobbies and governments. The mentions of degrowth are certainly remarkable. See Juan Bordera and Ferran Puig Vilar, “Lights and Shadows of the IPCC,” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2022; Bordera et al., “On How ‘Lobbies’ Water Down the World’s Most Important Climate Report,” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2022; Timothée Parrique, “Degrowth in the IPCC AR6 WGII,” March 5, 2022; Timothée Parrique, “Degrowth in the IPCC AR6 WGIII,” Timothée Parrique (blog), April 7, 2022. In regard to the lobbying of governments, companies, and other parties, another leaked document before the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow provided evidence of “more than 32,000 submissions made...to the team of scientists” in order to push “back on UN recommendations for action...before they will be asked at the summit to make significant commitments to slow down climate change and keep global warming to 1.5 degrees.” See Justin Rowlett and Tom Gerken, “COP26: Document Leak Reveals Nations Lobbying to Change Key Climate Report,” BBC News, October 21, 2021.

¹⁴ ↪ Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020).

established in the Paris Agreement, is certainly laudable. However, it is estimated that we have already reached 90

Today's business as usual puts the world on a trajectory to hit the trillionth metric ton of carbon, reaching the 2°C boundary—marking irreversible climate change—in 2035."

percent of the emissions needed to reach this target temperature; in a decade, we will have exceeded the limit. Thus, if in 2011 the annual reduction in emissions needed to reach the 1.5°C mark was 3.7 percent, today it is 9 percent.¹⁵

As environmental sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark have pointed out: "Today's business as usual puts the world on a trajectory to hit the trillionth metric ton of carbon, reaching the 2°C boundary—marking irreversible climate change—in 2035."¹⁶

As we have already noted, however, neither the responsibilities nor the consequences are shared equally across

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geographical, political, or human entities. A 2016 study already noted that the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and Australia had contributed 61 percent of the historical total accumulation of carbon dioxide emissions, compared to China and India's combined 13 percent, and Russia's 7 percent, while the rest of the world accounts for just 15

percent, and shipping and aviation for the remaining 4 percent—a disjuncture that would be even greater if emissions were calculated according to consumption and not just production.¹⁷

Inequality is reflected at many other levels as well. Another recent report by Oxfam calculated that the richest 1 percent

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of the planet has been responsible for emitting as much carbon dioxide as the poorest 3.1 billion people between 1990 and 2015, representing 15 percent of emissions. The richest 10 percent has emitted 52 percent, while the poorest half of the population have barely contributed 7 percent of the total.¹⁸ Another report

published recently by the same organization calculated that "the world's richest 1 percent are set to have per capita consumption emissions in 2030 that are still 30 times higher than the global per capita level compatible with the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement." While the per capita emissions of the richest 1 percent and 10 percent will be thirty and

The Global North is responsible for 74 percent of global excess material use and ecological damage, "driven primarily by the USA (27%) and the EU (25%)."

nine times higher than the required levels, respectively, with the richest 1 percent needing to reduce their current emissions by around 97 percent to reach the target, "the footprint of the poorest half of the global population are set to remain well below the 1.5°C-compatible level."¹⁹ A study on resource use between 1970 and 2017 found the

Global North responsible for 74 percent of global excess material use and ecological damage, "driven primarily by the

¹⁵ ↪ Carbon in the atmosphere prior to the industrial era was 600 billion tons, to which we have added another 500 billion tons since. At the current rate of emissions, carbon in the atmosphere is estimated to rise to 2.2 trillion tons by the year 2100. With some 10 billion tons of carbon, or more than 36 billion tons of carbon dioxide emitted per year, industrial activity has emitted 400 gross tonnage of carbon into the atmosphere in the last sixty years, equivalent to two-thirds of carbon dioxide emissions in the last million years. This has led to the current 417 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, unprecedented in human history—in 1958, it was 315 parts per million and in pre-industrial times around 270 parts per million, having remained below 300 parts per million for 800,000 years, except for a rise to 300 parts per million 350,000 years ago. To this should be added the estimate that "during the next 150 years, humanity will emit an additional 1,000 to 4,000 Gt [gross tonnage] of carbon in the atmosphere, or up to seven times the total amount of CO₂ that existed in the atmosphere before the advent of modern civilisation." Lawrence M. Krauss, *The Physics of Climate Change* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2021).

¹⁶ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, "Imperialism in the Anthropocene," The Jus Semper Global Alliance, January 2021.

¹⁷ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, "Imperialism in the Anthropocene," The Jus Semper Global Alliance, January 2021.

¹⁸ ↪ "Carbon Emissions of Richest 1 Percent More than Double the Emissions of the Poorest Half of Humanity," Oxfam, September 21, 2020.

¹⁹ ↪ "Carbon Inequality in 2030: Per Capita Consumption Emissions and the 1.5°C goal," Oxfam, November 5, 2021.

USA (27%) and the EU (25%),” with China responsible for 15 percent and the rest of the Global South for only 8 percent.²⁰

The recently published Sustainable Development Index, led by economic anthropologist Jason Hickel, “measures the ecological efficiency of human development, recognizing that development must be achieved within planetary

The frightening conclusion to which all this data leads is that, as Ian Angus has pointed out, “if the poorest 3 billion people on the planet somehow disappeared tomorrow, there would be virtually no reduction in ongoing environmental destruction.”

boundaries,” and is meant to “update the Human Development Index for the ecological realities of the Anthropocene.” It has corroborated (with data up to 2019, based on consumption and not production) the theses so far presented: the emissions and resource wastage of the rich countries of the Global North and the poor countries

of the Global South are spectacularly disproportionate.²¹ The ecological imperialism between core and periphery is therefore a geopolitical reality of the Anthropocene.²²

The frightening conclusion to which all this data leads is that, as Ian Angus has pointed out, “if the poorest 3 billion people on the planet somehow disappeared tomorrow, there would be virtually no reduction in ongoing environmental destruction.”²³

Deaccumulation, Decommodification, and Decolonization: A Just Degrowth

In the face of the contradiction between capitalist growth and the geophysical limits of the planet, with the inevitable decrease in the availability and access to its material resources, degrowth has taken on an unusual centrality in public

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debate. This is not just in response to the latest IPCC report—despite the changes made to the published version of the Summary for Policymakers compared to the original leaks. The European Environment Agency published a document

entitled “Growth Without Economic Growth” and the winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics, Giorgio Parisi, took advantage of his meeting with parliamentarians in the Italian Chamber of Deputies to emphasise that “GDP growth is incompatible with the fight against global warming.”²⁴ For its part, the international edition of the New York Times brought degrowth to its front page, highlighting Hickel’s contributions to the movement, which he presented as “a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being.”²⁵ If we allow growth to remain the central measure of the economy, it will be at the expense of an already compromised climate stability for centuries, if not millennia, to

²⁰ ↪ 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 Planet Health* 6 (2022): 342–49.

²¹ ↪ Jason Hickel, “The Sustainable Development Index: Measuring the Ecological Efficiency of Human Development in the Anthropocene,” *Ecological Economics* 167 (2020); Sustainable Development Index website, sustainable.de

²² ↪ This is expressed, for example, in such telling data as Cuba, victim of an economic blockade for more than six decades, appearing in 5th place in the Human Development Index, with 3.27 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per capita and 7.86 tons of material footprint per capita, while the United States, the main perpetrator of that blockade, appears in 160th place (out of 165), with 19.01 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per capita and 32.43 tons of material footprint per capita.

²³ ↪ Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 112.

²⁴ ↪ “Growing without Economic Growth,” European Environment Agency, January 18, 2022; Giorgio Parisi, “The Increase in GDP Is in Contrast with the Climate,” *Italy 24 News*, October 8, 2021.

²⁵ ↪ Spencer Bokart-Lindell, “Do We Need to Shrink the Economy to Stop Climate Change?,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2021. The article quotes Jason Hickel, “What Does Degrowth Mean? A Few Points of Clarification,” *Globalizations* 18 (2021): 1105–11.

We are talking about a systemic crisis inherent to the logic of capital, reaching into all social and natural spheres of a finite planet in a critical state.

come, even if we cut our greenhouse gas emissions immediately.²⁶ Though this idea is advancing in the mainstream, nevertheless more than a few representatives of institutionalised power, clinging to their vested and entrenched interests, prefer to maintain the “decoupling” imposture, as if the emperor were not already naked.²⁷ It is on this catastrophic

“really existing” ecology that an already labyrinthine and thorny energy transition will have to be built, which makes the scenario even more complicated.

If the only crisis was of energy and resources, perhaps it would be possible to face it with a certain techno-optimistic margin, without having to think in the terms championed by advocates of degrowth—such as Hickel and economists Tim Parrique and Giorgos Kallis, all three of whom were mentioned in the IPCC Working Group III report. But we are talking

The technological solutions—from those based on carbon capture and sequestration processes to those committed to the massive implementation of renewables or megalomaniacal geoengineering fantasies—are flawed by a naive techno-optimism that is close to magical thinking.

about a systemic crisis inherent to the logic of capital, reaching into all social and natural spheres of a finite planet in a critical state. For this reason, any technofetishist bet faces unavoidable dilemmas. If the aim were to solve by technological means the climate problem associated with the emission of greenhouse gases (only one of the multiple planetary thresholds that have been surpassed) while leaving

present social relations intact, it would have to entail aggravating the energy decline.

The technological solutions being marketed in most institutional spheres—from those based on carbon capture and sequestration processes to those committed to the massive implementation of renewables or megalomaniacal geoengineering fantasies—are flawed by a naive techno-optimism that is close to magical thinking. Moreover, they overlook multiple material variables that go against the very principles of geoengineering, not to mention the ethical

Just from 1990 to 2015, the Global North net appropriated embodied raw material, hectares of land, energy, and labour worth \$242 trillion, equivalent to a quarter of its GDP. And in the Global South, 2.2 billion people cannot access safe drinking water, 4.2 billion lack safe sanitation, 2 billion live in water-scarcity, 759 million have electricity access and 2.6 billion continue to lack clean ways to cook.

dilemmas associated with the further litigation of political deliberation or the almost reverential trust in highly technocratic circles to which these mechanisms would lead.²⁸ If this were not enough, the energy and resource crises have similarly important ramifications, such as increasing extinction of species and critical loss of biodiversity in general. These systematic tendencies would inevitably be aggravated by a poorly managed energy transition that would require massive amounts of land and

resources, deepening the destructive social consequences of corporate extractivism, especially for rural and Indigenous populations.

At the same time, any proposal that takes this scenario seriously must confront the blatant social inequality of a planet where, just from 1990 to 2015, the Global North net appropriated embodied raw material, hectares of land, energy, and

²⁶ ↪ Krauss, *The Physics of Climate Change*.

²⁷ ↪ Helmut Haberl et al., “A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling of GDP, Resource Use and GHG Emissions, Part II: Synthesizing the Insights,” *Environmental Research Letters* 15, no. 6 (2020).

²⁸ ↪ Turiel, *Petrocalipsis*; Pedro A. Prieto, “100% Decarbonisation with 100% Renewable Energy Systems Through Power to Gas and Direct Electrification,” 15/15/15, April 2, 2021; Clive Hamilton, “Geoengineering and the Politics of Science,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 70 (2014): 17–26.

labour worth \$242 trillion, equivalent to a quarter of its gross domestic product.²⁹ And where, notably in the Global South, 2.2 billion people cannot access safe drinking water, 4.2 billion lack safe sanitation, 2 billion live in water-scarce countries, 759 million have no access to electricity (while an estimated 660 million will remain without it until 2030), and 2.6 billion continue to lack clean ways to cook.³⁰ Moreover, the war in Ukraine has put billions of people at the door of an unprecedented food crisis, inseparable from the ongoing energy crisis.³¹ At a time when the ten richest men in the world have doubled their wealth and 99 percent of humanity has seen their incomes slashed, nobody has the right to tell the “wretched of the earth” that they are too late for development, or that the future has already closed for them, especially as their impact on the environmental crisis continues to be negligible.³²

This concatenation of problems places us before a convoluted scenario from which it will not be easy to escape.

We cannot simply appeal to individual and spontaneous transformations, but must turn to collective and coordinated planning.... It is this exclusive property of capital, the accumulation that gives it sustenance, that makes growth contradict life itself. Any just degrowth proposal that radically confronts this scenario must also be a proposal of deaccumulation.

Proposals must address this complexity at its root, radically: faced with an ecosocial conflict systemic in nature, we cannot simply appeal to individual and spontaneous transformations, but must turn to collective and coordinated planning. For millennia, humanity based its economic production on meeting its needs, but, as Angus points out, “under capitalism, most production is for exchange: labour and nature are exploited to produce goods that can be sold for more than the cost of production, in order to accumulate more capital, and repeat the

process.” Growth acquires a centrality under capital without historical precedent; “growth ideology doesn’t cause perpetual accumulation—it justifies it.”³³

The inequality on which the system is based is neither the product of an abstract human condition nor of a succession of unforeseeable mistakes, but responds to the very logic of capitalist accumulation, with the constant and expansive growth it requires to exist, regardless of the finite condition of the planet—today fed by the incessant and growing consumption of fossil fuels. It is this exclusive property of capital, the accumulation that gives it sustenance, that makes

Degrowth is also a “call for the reversal of the processes that lie behind growth: ...disaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonisation.”

growth contradict life itself. Any just degrowth proposal that radically confronts this scenario must also be a proposal of deaccumulation.³⁴ Since it is ecological inequality, inherent to capitalist accumulation, that produces and reproduces the dramatic ecosocial conditions faced by the most exploited and marginalised, any radical critique of growth will have

to be made on the basis of a positive alternative.

As Hickel has pointed out, degrowth mainly focuses on the high-income imperial cores because it “does not apply to economies that are not characterised by excess resource and energy use,” that is, the Global South in general, given its unequal ecological exchange with the Global North. Thus, degrowth is also a “call for the reversal of the processes that

²⁹ ↪ Jason Hickel, Christian Dörninger, 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 (2022).

³⁰ ↪ “Global Issues: Water,” United Nations, accessed April 27, 2022; “Global Launch: Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report,” World Health Organization, accessed April 27, 2022.

³¹ ↪ “First Crisis, Then Catastrophe,” Oxfam, April 12, 2022.

³² ↪ “A Deadly Virus: 5 Shocking Facts About Global Extreme Inequality,” Oxfam.

³³ ↪ Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 113.

³⁴ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “[Capitalism and Degrowth: An Impossibility Theorem](#),” *Monthly Review* 62, no. 8 (January 2011).

lie behind growth: ...disaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonisation." As such, it aims to fight atmospheric colonisation while engaging with delinking projects in the South, which refuse "to submit national development policy to the imperatives of Northern capital...to increase the prices of their labour and resources...demand fairer terms of trade and finance, and more democratic representation in global governance."³⁵ A universalist approach to degrowth has been misinterpreted on occasion as a global tabula rasa, but this would be an equally patronising proposal, a type of "provincial universalism" of the kind with which the Global North is accustomed to treat those it seeks to subjugate.³⁶

A coordinated plan out of this crisis must entail, as the agrarian sociologist Max Ajl has noted, the disappearance of sectors like "the military, non-renewable energy production, chemical fertilisers," among others, while "agroecological food production, public transport, primary healthcare, and renewable energy, need to grow incredibly fast...while remaining decommodified."³⁷ Furthermore, the Global North will have to pay the ecological debt with which it has robbed the Global South, thus assuming demands made by the latter in relation to climate justice. Only this can end the perpetuation of colonial-imperial domination based on unequal exchange, notably through the expropriation of natural goods and global labour arbitrage.³⁸

Degrowth is all about radical democratic planning from below, the autonomy of those who suffer the chronic inequality of the system to develop ways to combat it, while those responsible for the crisis are made genuinely accountable.

From the Materially Inevitable to the Socially Desirable

A dominant criticism of degrowth is that it parallels policies of austerity, whose application during the recent capitalist crises has aroused fierce popular rejection. Arguments along these lines are absurd from their very conception. Austerity has been the cornerstone of neoliberalism, an elitist, undemocratic model in which losses are socialised and profits are privatised. Degrowth, instead, is all about radical democratic planning from below, the autonomy of those who suffer the chronic inequality of the system to develop ways to combat it, while those responsible for the crisis are made genuinely accountable. Hickel has identified six characteristics of degrowth that distinguish it from austerity and recession: (1) "Degrowth is a planned, coherent policy to reduce ecological impact, reduce inequality, and improve well-being." (2) "Degrowth has a discriminating approach to reducing economic activity. It seeks to scale down ecologically destructive and socially less necessary production...while expanding socially important sectors like healthcare, education, care and conviviality." (3) "Degrowth introduces policies to prevent unemployment, and indeed even to improve employment, such as by shortening the working week, introducing a job guarantee with a living wage, and rolling out retraining programmes to shift people out of sunset sectors." (4) "Degrowth seeks to reduce inequality and share national and global income more fairly, such as with progressive taxation and living wage policies." (5) "Degrowth seeks to expand universal public goods and services, such as health, education, transportation and housing, in order to decommodify the foundational goods that

Proposals from the perspective of degrowth and ecosocialism within the sphere of climate justice should be based on major social changes, which will involve transformations in all economic sectors of social life.

³⁵ ↪ Hickel, "What Does Degrowth Mean?"; Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed, 1990).

³⁶ ↪ Thorough criticism to these kinds of approaches to degrowth can be found, among others, in Foster, "Capitalism and Degrowth" and Michael Löwy, "Eco-socialism and/or De-growth," *Rise*, October 5, 2020.

³⁷ ↪ Max Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto, 2021), 58.

³⁸ ↪ John Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*.

people need in order to lead flourishing lives.” (6) “Degrowth is part of a plan to achieve a rapid transition to renewable energy, restore soils and biodiversity, and reverse ecological breakdown.”³⁹

In this regard, critical models aimed at what ecological economics professor Julia Steinberger calls “living well within limits”—a notion that to some extent engages with other communitarianist ideas, such as the Andean *sumak kawsay* (good living) or the Thompsonian “moral economy”—have been developed in pursuit of these goals.⁴⁰ Proposals from the perspective of degrowth and ecosocialism within the sphere of climate justice should be based on major social changes, which will involve transformations in all economic sectors of social life.⁴¹ Some of these would imply: (1) the control of industrial production, with the aim of getting rid of planned obsolescence, goods destined to be ephemeral, and uncontrolled consumption; (2) industrial planning and decentralisation to break up monopolies and favor local, preferably cooperative, models; (3) the drastic reduction of working hours and the payment of fair wages to eliminate global labour inequalities; (4) the application of compensatory measures that redistribute wealth and favor equality of resources; (5) the implementation of urban planning that develops local labour and rebalances the rural-urban relationship. Taken together, these changes would entail a shift in the use of construction materials, such as focusing on

For this to be possible and for their application to be truly part of a policy of deaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonisation, the Global North would have to address other historical demands coming from the Global South.

local, non-polluting materials that do not mobilise unnecessary energy waste; a commitment to public and low-emission transport, making the use of private vehicles increasingly less desirable; recognition and appreciation of the work of social reproduction that is concentrated around care, rest, and leisure; strong investment in preventive health, strengthened by changes in the working day and transportation, as well as more free time; a commitment to

agroecology and public spaces, with an emphasis on native and adapted species, seasonal rotational cultivation, and local consumption.⁴²

These are all proposals that could be developed at the global level, but for this to be possible and for their application to be truly part of a policy of deaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonisation, the Global North would have to address other historical demands coming from the Global South. As part of the respect for the sovereignty of the South, it

The great challenge we undoubtedly face is to make desirable what is beneficial for the majority.... embracing the materially inevitable in ways that promote the socially desirable.

would be essential to recognise the ecological debt and its compensation, meaning the restoration of land, water, and atmosphere to the peoples of the South and the Indigenous nations. It would also be necessary for the Global North to transfer technology and defray costs associated with addressing this historical-structural debt, including migrant and refugee crises created by imperialism. The imperialist cores must open their

borders; assume the debt of adaptation to this climatic reality to prevent, minimise, and confront the damage caused;

³⁹ ↪ Hickel, “What Does Degrowth Mean?”

⁴⁰ ↪ Living Well Within Limits [LiLi] website, lili.leeds.ac.uk. One of these models proposes the possibility of doubling global renewable energy capacity with the aim of reducing, by 2050, global net energy consumption to 1960s levels, despite the tripling of the population. See Joel Millward-Hopkins, Julia K. Steinberger, Narasimha D. Rao, and Yannick Oswald, “[Providing Decent Living with Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario](#),” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2022. However, even if inspiring, the actual “cleanness” and availability of renewable energy, as well as how this would impact workers and ecology of the Global South, remain unsolved in this model. In regard to the “cleanness” and actual availability of the dominating models of renewable energy, see Don Fitz, “What is Energy Denial?,” *Resilience*, September 12, 2019; Turiel, *Petrocalipsis*; Pedro A. Prieto, “100% Decarbonisation with 100% Renewable Energy Systems Through Power to Gas and Direct Electrification.”

⁴¹ ↪ A recent synthesis of degrowth and ecosocialism can be found in Michael Löwy, Bengi Akbulut, Sabrina Fernandes, and Giorgos Kallis, “[For an Ecosocialist Degrowth](#),” The Jus Semper Global Alliance, May 2022. We wrote this piece before its publication, and thus unfortunately do not reflect on it here.

⁴² ↪ Many of these proposals have been comprehensively examined in Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal*. See also Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: Windmill, 2020); Stan Cox, *The Green New Deal and Beyond: Ending the Climate Emergency While We Still Can* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2020).

and honor these debts as part of a greater debt to Mother Earth through the implementation of the UN Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth.⁴³

The great challenge we undoubtedly face is to make desirable what is beneficial for the majority. It is a matter, therefore, of disputing neoliberal opportunism by means of an ecosocialist strategic realism: the recognition of the necessity of material deaccumulation based on a sense of community and internationalist solidarity. Or, in other words, embracing the materially inevitable in ways that promote the socially desirable.

By Way of Closing

Globalization, by which capital has reached its highest heights of imperial domination at the expense of millions, will

Those of us who can still imagine the end of capitalism before the end of the world, have to fight for a strategy of mutual aid as a way out of the empire of chaos we are now confronting.

probably vanish once the oil-footed giant no longer has a base. In the face of this unavoidable reality, those of us who can still imagine the end of capitalism before the end of the world, have to fight for a strategy of mutual aid as a way out of the empire of chaos we are now confronting. Our response must be based on solidarity and internationalist cooperation. The same “provincial universalism” of the elites of the

Global North that has built and pushed the entire planet to the edge of the abyss cannot be relied on to give us the way to escape it.

We are dealing with a material and energy decline that will force us to ask ourselves whether we want to degrow by force or in a coordinated way, in order to manage scarcity with socially just planning. We can only get out of the current malaise in a coordinated and planned way—that is, on the basis of radical democracy. But as this will not emerge as a *deus ex machina*, who is called to mobilise a change of such dimensions?

The recent Oxfam report concludes that “carbon inequality is extreme, both globally and within most countries,” and thus the critical “efforts [to cut carbon emissions] must go hand-in-hand with measures to cut pervasive inequality and

A program of ecosocialist, planned, cooperative, and internationalist degrowth must take into account the effect of ecological imperialism on the different societies and lives of the planet and seek a radical, democratic resolution.

ensure that the world’s richest citizens—wherever they live—lead the way.” In other words, the largest historical per capita emitters, which are called to scale down resource use by at least 70 percent to stay within actual sustainable levels, are those that should serve as a decarbonising model for the rest, thus reducing the astronomical ecological debt owed to the

Global South, as the countries of the North are responsible for 92 percent of excess emissions.⁴⁴ In short, it is a matter of rescuing the classic socialist aphorism adopted by Karl Marx in Critique of the Gotha Programme: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”⁴⁵ A program of ecosocialist, planned, cooperative, and internationalist degrowth must take into account the effect of ecological imperialism on the different societies and lives of the planet and seek a radical, democratic resolution.

⁴³ ↪ Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal*, 11. These issues are thoroughly developed in the second part of Ajl’s book.

⁴⁴ ↪ Hickel, O’Neill, Fanning, and Zoomkawala, “National Responsibility for Ecological Breakdown”; Jason Hickel, “Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown: An Equality-Based Attribution Approach for Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Excess of the Planetary Boundary,” *Lancet Planet Health* 4 (2020): 399–404.

⁴⁵ ↪ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875; repr., Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 16.

In the face of the current profound crises, social organisation and collective political action are necessary. We must activate the underlying links between climate action movements and the diverse needs and interests of those who bear

An ecosocialist degrowth must be built on internationalist alliances where the periphery takes center stage. The political subjects and collectives in the North are called to humbly assume the historical demands that the South has tirelessly and fairly made.

the brunt of the unfolding crises. Repairing the unequal ecological exchange between the Global North and Global South, between the powerful classes and the exploited and marginalised of the world, must be an inherent part of any struggle for climate justice.⁴⁶ By recognising the link between the disproportionate emissions of the rich and the oppression of the poor, the core must assume that the looting of the periphery is constituent to the

world's ecological disaster and confront it. Otherwise, as historian Vijay Prashad has stated, the climate justice movement "will have no legs."⁴⁷ An ecosocialist degrowth must be built on internationalist alliances where the periphery takes center stage. The political subjects and collectives in the North are called to humbly assume the historical demands that the South has tirelessly and fairly made. Only then will we be able to look with hope not just to the future, but, above all, to the present.

⁴⁶ ↪ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972; repr., London: Verso, 2018); Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review, 1997); Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021); Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001); Foster and Holleman, "The Theory of Unequal Ecological Exchange: A Marx-Odum Dialectic"; Jennifer E. Givens, Xiaorui Huang, and Andrew K. Jorgenson, "Ecologically Unequal Exchange: A Theory of Global Environmental Injustice," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019); Alf Hornborg, *Global Magic: Technologies of Appropriation from Ancient Rome to Wall Street* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Hickel, Dörninger, Wieland, and Suwandi, "Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy"; Jason Hickel, "Aid in Reverse: How Poor Countries Develop Rich Countries," *Guardian*, January 14, 2017.

⁴⁷ ↪ "Vijay Prashad People's Summit Speech from OUR TIME IS NOW #3," YouTube, COP26 Coalition, November 10, 2021. As director of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and in collaboration with Carlos Ron from the Instituto Samuel Robinson (Venezuela), Prashad also presented the document "A Plan to Save the Planet," which was "drafted in the tradition of the NIEO (1974) and of The Challenge of the South (1990)," "building towards a resolution at the United Nations to save the planet." This "living document" includes a series of significant ecosocial proposals, mainly from the Global South, thanks to the joint efforts of almost thirty entities organized around the Network of Research Institutes, "a collective brought together by ALBA-TCP, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, and the Simón Bolívar Institute for Peace and Solidarity Among People." "A Plan to Save the Planet," Tricontinental, November 24, 2021.

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