



A Green New Deal Photo: Anesti Vega, Green New Deal Climate Strike Mural © 2019; Mural: Maluco Studios, September 25 2019, San Francisco. (Photo: Heidi De Vries / Flickr)

“Neither liberal nor social democratic policies have a structured approach to understanding imperialism, including its ecological history”

By [Alejandro Pedregal](#), [Max Aji](#) (Posted Jul 25, 2022)

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Max Ajl does not bite his tongue, neither when he writes nor when he speaks. This rural sociologist based in Tunisia, a researcher associated with the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment and with the Rural Sociology Group at Wageningen University, has written possibly the fiercest critique of the dominant models of the Green New Deal (GND), both social democratic and liberal. With a language as scathing as it is rigorous, his *A People's Green New Deal*, published by Pluto Press, is an urgent book that, in addition to speaking out against the Eurocentrism of Western green policies, devotes half of its pages to elaborating alternative proposals. Its method draws from the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist internationalism of the rich radical thought of the Global South—from the Marxist theory of dependency of Ruy Mauro Marino or Vania Bambirra, to the Thirdworldist world-systems analysis of Samir Amin or the decolonialism of Enrique Dussel—, in order to address head-on, without any subterfuge, the current climate emergency and the ecologically unequal exchange between core and periphery, and to imagine an eco-socialist future hand in hand with a socially just degrowth. Economic anthropologist Jason Hickel has called Ajl's work “the best book yet on the GND”; historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, a “lucid and profound” text with “an actual political program of survival and renewal,” where “nearly every sentence is urgent and quotable”; indigenous activist Nick Estes has called it a “critical work” so that, in the face of the climate emergency, the North understands the persistence of

anti-capitalism and antiimperialism in the South; and evolutionary biologist Rob Wallace has invited anyone who “really wants to learn what’ ll be necessary for our species to survive climate apocalypse” to read it. We spoke with Aji about his critiques of hegemonic GNDs and the alternatives to them, as well as his position on other pressing debates within environmentalist thought and the challenges facing the Global South in light of the global geopolitical reconfiguration brought about by the war in Ukraine.

Your book intervenes in the GND debate by disputing the dominant approaches by liberal and social-democrat views, hegemonic within certain sectors of the Western left. What are the features and limitations of these two, especially in regard to the development of social-democracy and its connection to the history of the socialist bloc?

Liberal and social democratic policies converge and diverge. Both envision a place for capitalism in the short-to-medium term; neither have a structured approach to understanding imperialism, including the ecological history of imperialism. Neither support national liberation for the periphery. Both in general neglect agriculture, especially smallholder agriculture and pastoralism in the periphery. And both are warm (if not very warm) to capitalist-developed technological solutions. They lack a clear sense of the social subjects who will carry forward ecological transformation on a world scale. And they practice an essentially opportunist and frequently chauvinist politics, trying to lull and allure liberal anti-racist progressives, rejecting building a common front with radical forces in the South, and rejecting anti-imperialism as a political practice (this is alleged to be “campism,” a northern smear dredged up from Trotskyite pro-NATO Cold War scribbles, and essentially now used primarily to tar antiimperialists in order to harry them into silence or embarrassment).

Each of these GND approaches forgets that northern post-war industrial Fordism/social democracy emerged against the threat of foreign communist powers setting the world developmental agenda on a systemic level, combined with the domestic popularity of extremely radical redistributive policies, not to say widespread explicitly communist sympathies and organizing. That is, even on their own terms—which I reject—they are unachievable, which may be why they are increasingly receiving financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation for their policy papers. The ruling class seems to understand that it has a clear interest in channeling unease with the social-ecological crisis into dead-end reformist technocracy. These proposals also forget that the post-war welfare states were

based on a history of colonial looting and ongoing neo-colonial value transfer. It is not a surprise, then, that many proposals for a northern social-democratic or socialist GND malign the radical attempts at social transformation in Venezuela or Zimbabwe, or erase the role of the U.S. in the anti-MAS coup d'etat in Bolivia, or are willing to surrender on the Palestinian struggle. That is, they ignore or deride the national question and more-or-less converge by effect on continued neo-colonial domination of the South alongside ecological civilization or ecological market socialism for the North.

How does your approach differ from these positions?

In fact, I think my book would be a little different if I had written it now. Having spent more time with literature from the 1970s and metabolized better the essence of thinking around national liberation, I more and more think that in line with the classical Leninist hypotheses (which are now castigated as “Third Worldism”) revolution, including ecological revolution, can only begin in the weak links of the world-system where primitive accumulation is permanent, social reproduction and under-reproduction of the ecology converge, and the victims of neocolonialism encounter simultaneous national, social, and ecological contradictions. This does not mean there is no place for northern struggle for eco-socialism, but it means that we have to raise consciousness around things like anti-imperialism, national sovereignty, the climate debt, etcetera, at every step of transforming northern capitalism into a northern eco-socialism founded on permanently sustainable management of the ecology and rational collective management of the human interaction with non-human nature.

If we put agriculture, sustainable/appropriate technology, including architecture, the national question, climate debt, and world developmental convergence through directly taking on the northern “style of development” based on capitalist-induced over-consumption and over-production of commodities, at the center of these debates, we end up with a political strategy. And this would be based on popular organizing to enhance the quality of the use-values available to the northern working classes, turn them into social rights, and build a principled anti-imperialist front with southern national-popular forces.

Can you tell us about how your approach engages, methodologically and analytically, with unequal exchange and dependency theories, as these contributions are so closely linked to radical authors from the Global South? How is this related to the

demands of national liberation movements and the anti-imperialist radical tradition, for instance? And how are those related to the ecological emergency we live in?

National liberation puts the politics of sovereignty and essentially auto-centered development, or more likely regional collective self-reliance, at the center of ecological planning. It reminds us that the dusk of formal colonization was often the dawn of neocolonialism, precisely meaning continued value drain from South to North. Dependency theories, which many northern academics have put great effort into discrediting, is at its core a theory of the drain of surplus value and of the peripheral social structures which allow for the outflow of value. To stop that outflow of value you need to reconfigure domestic social structures, re-orient them towards introverted and auto-centered development, putting the productive forces and the play of the productive forces under domestic popular and proletarian control. This is the line of thought we can trace from Amilcar Cabral to Ismail-Sabri Abdalla, and which reached its peak in practice with the Chinese revolution. Unequal exchange, of course, is one mechanism for the outflow of value (there are many others, including illegitimate debt repayments, intellectual property monopolies, dollar seigniorage, etcetera). Now, my approach draws on the new theories of ecologically unequal exchange, which in fact group together a diverse family of empirical findings essentially showing that alongside increased northern appropriation of the products of global hectareage and mineral resources, there is also an uneven exposure to global pollution. In fact, this is a form of superexploitation based on the under-reproduction of non-human nature which leads to damage to human life and its reduction below its potential historically-given level. This tells us, again, that the southern proletariat, semi-proletariat, slum-dwellers, peasants, pastoralists, forest dwellers, face the ecological crisis as a crisis of day-to-day well-being and so need to be central to a liberatory vision.

In your book, you discuss the importance of ecological debt and reparation for a genuine people's GND, which would take seriously the environmental damage caused by the North to the South. What does this demand imply? What are the historical reclamations in this regard and what's the importance of the Cochabamba Agreement for this matter?

Ecological debt has been raised at least since the early 1990s (perhaps, and likely, earlier). It is akin to a broader discourse of reparations coming from a wide variety of actors who have been "the underside" of imperialism and colonial-capitalist accumulation, be it from the slave trade, colonial drain, or more recently the neo-

colonial enclosure of the atmosphere and appropriation of the biosphere's capacity to absorb and metabolize CO₂ emissions. Because the South cannot emit the same amount of per capita emissions without crashing the biosphere, and because the South cannot walk the same cheap energy paths, and because the South is already suffering from damages from global warming, the North accordingly owes it a debt. Building on earlier demands, the Cochabamba's People's Agreement stated that the OECD countries should do fiscal transfers of 6 percent of their gross national product (GNP), or around \$1.2 trillion from the U.S. alone, for an indeterminate period, as reparations. So we know what it means numerically. The question is, what does it mean politically? I do not have a clear answer to that. At the very least it clarifies that the responsibility for the ecological crisis is essentially northern. But concretely speaking, it would require a widespread insurrectionary atmosphere in the North to actually commit to fiscal transfers to the South, since they would go alongside a controlled reduction of the ecological "heaviness" of northern production and consumption. That "reduction," which is basically what degrowth refers to, would mean a constant lightening of the ecological impact of northern production—which cannot merely be reduced to de-commodification—and in turn, would flow from a heightened consciousness that northern "ways of life" have to change to create a planet in which many are able to live well. We are, obviously, very far from that situation on any level.

You have also exposed how reasonable environmental concerns and terminology (the debate around the notion of extractivism comes to mind, for instance) can be instrumentalised by the imperial cores for their own interests of global dominance. This has been the case, for instance, with certain segments of the environmental left in regard to Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, etc. What are the limitations and dangers of these views?

I find it helpful to take a sociology of knowledge approach to this question. First, though, to be clear, when people encounter ecological degradation that damages their ability to live decent lives, it is natural that they name and resist that degradation. We should have all the sympathy in the world for people living in such conditions. But such sympathy is not a political map, and naming is not innocent or random. It is not clear to me that extractivism, as circulated in the works of scholars like Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, or Maristella Svampa, provide any such political map. Take Svampa, who has been particularly embraced by the regime-change left. She writes, "Contemporary neo-extractivism refers to a way of appropriating nature and a

development model based on the over-exploitation of natural goods, largely nonrenewable, characterized by its large scale and its orientation toward export, as well as by the vertiginous expansion of the borders of exploitation to new territories.” Is this in any way an improvement over previous widespread core-periphery analysis or dependency analysis, based on extraversion, disarticulated accumulation, and unequal exchange in world trade? It is basically analytical chaos, what Marx called a chaotic concept. It cannot tell us how to balance the social needs of those segments of peripheral population who unfortunately need capital from commodity exports in order to secure their social needs (and would need to process some of those commodities under any conceivable industrialization pattern as part of a socialist transition). On the analytical level, as Alvaro Garcia Linera has written, “Just as the extractivism of our societies is an integral part of the networks of the international division of labour, the industrial processing of raw materials or the knowledge economy are part of the same world capitalist division of labour. Neither extractivism nor non-extractivism is a solution to this worldwide domination.”

We need to discuss how to move to ecologically modulated industrialization, including for reasons of national self-defense, as part of national liberation and in a situation of neo-colonial dependency. Those are the issues. The extractivist discourse, part-and-parcel of a shift on the Left away from serious comprehension of macro-economic planning, the need for industrialization, and the need to re-think industrialization, has simply not proven to be a basis for thinking through these issues in a way that can give us a guiding rope that allows us to navigate theoretically and practically contradictions which emerge between communities directly harmed by resource extraction, and those in the periphery which need resources from that extraction for day-to-day survival. Although I am a committed agro-ecologist, a pure focus on ecologically embedded agricultural production cannot and will not by itself solve developmental problems of the 21st century.

As you have noted, it's been largely discussed that the environmental damage led by the Global North economies is mostly suffered by the peoples in the Global South. What sort of social reorganization could be taken to stop this?

Northern economies need to be restructured, first, on non-capitalist lines, to produce not for the accumulation of surplus value, but oriented around the permanently ecologically sustainable production of things people need for day-to-day survival and a decent life, including homes, cultures, appropriate levels of industrialization, decent food, medical care, and transport systems. We know that this can be done with far

lower levels of ecological impact, whether this be preventative healthcare, agro-ecology, sustainable/vernacular building materials and designs, collective mass transit and re-planned cities. Life will certainly have to change in the North in substantial ways, as the other option is to off-load the costs of “social democratic” green industrialization onto the South, which would be a disaster from any perspective.

As a rural sociologist, you dedicate quite a big part of your argument to the agricultural question, in relation to land and soil. Why is this so relevant and yet so often undervalued by mainstream environmentalism in the Global North? What are the major issues to take into consideration in this regard for thinking of a people’s GND?

There is a deep anti-peasant prejudice in western thought, including western Marxism (anti-peasant more than antinature, since western thought often fetishizes a certain construction of nature). People naturally do not think about where they get their food, because they basically think machines get their food for them. In fact, substantial amounts of global labor regimes are engineered to support imperialism and global accumulation overall and cheap tropical foodstuff for northern workers, as part of the northern corporatist pact. Now: it is only natural that those regimes would be made invisible, because they would imply different theoretical and therefore political mandates for northern environmentalism. In particular it would mean putting national liberation and the agrarian question, North and South, at the center of socialist planning, thought, and practice. Agriculture is also a keystone sector for at least getting to genuine 0 CO₂ emissions, and for that matter for certainly attention intensive and perhaps, perhaps not labor-intensive CO₂ drawdown. This drawdown is a matter of survival for southern states to ride out this century. Thus we need to place agriculture front-and-center for land use planning including moving to national-level planning of agro-ecological production. Agrarian questions are just critical also to dry up labor reservoirs, increase rural consumption and free up a surplus for sovereign industrialization, as well as to secure necessary domestic inputs for, again, an ecologically attentive form of Third World (and First World!) industrialization, moving to sustainable and renewable inputs where possible. This means placing agriculture in conversation with global planning the world over.

There are tendencies within certain trends of environmentalism, even within the left, to think almost exclusively on solutions from a technological perspective to address the ecological emergency. How does this techno-fetishism and techno-optimism

neglect North–South relationships? What would be the role of technology in a people’ s GND?

The whole techno–fetishism is first of all a brain–exploding device which is anti–thought, and which prevents us from adopting a principled Marxist position on technology. Absolutely no one is against technology as such, not just because everyone wants some technology in their lives, but furthermore because there really are not technologies “as such.” There are concrete technologies, which depend on particular configurations of market prices and access to pollution sites and labor inputs in order to be feasible or un–feasible, and at least at an initial point, reflect the class interests of those in a position to determine the trajectory of technological development. This means not merely levels of pollution but “solutions” to global warming like geo–engineering or biofuels which will far more sharply impact the South versus the North—for example through allowing global warming to continue through burning fossil fuels in the hope of a future technological salvation which will come too late for Bangladesh or the Caribbean; or which preserves the northern monopoly–capitalist created “way of life” while suppressing peripheral food consumption, as in the case of biofuels.

A socialist or people’ s GND would be heavily reliant on technology but would use the precautionary principle when implementing technological change, would ensure that the intellectual property would be in the public domain or in the hands of radical states, would try to develop technology in partnership with the poorer people who would need it, and would be mindful of the ecological impacts of industrial versus non–industrial technologies (which reminds us that the extractivism discussion touches on real concerns even if in an unproductive way).

The war in Ukraine seems to have displaced the environmental debate from the central focus of the public debate. The urgency of implementing certain environmental policies seems to be postponed as a consequence. At the same time, this seems to reshape the geopolitics of energy globally, while there emerges the possibility of a more marked division between North and South, affecting prospects of trade and the reorganization of the finance sector. What kind of scenarios could open for the environmental struggles in this context? What role could the Global South play for that matter?

It seems to me that the U.S. removal of sanctions on Venezuela is a major opening for a renewal of socialist construction in Latin America, after the imperial-imposed Thermidor which has been ongoing for the past years. Amidst the new rising surge of the Left within the electoral sphere, a reflection of unceasing popular mobilization and the complete discrediting of neoliberalism if not capitalism as modes of political rule, we need to forge a new political-ecological and eco-socialist discourse which takes seriously the concerns raised by the “extractivist” discussion, but in a way that allows for moving forward towards eco-socialist horizons. In particular, the new political space and slightly reduced atmosphere of imperial predation should be an opportunity to again insist that socialism is on the agenda and that the forms of accommodation to monopoly capital, which have gained strength over the last decade, need to be actively resisted. Finally, of course, leftist forces the world over need to assess the opportunities and limits of a new multi-polarity in terms of opening up developmental space closed off by the anti-developmental agenda of U.S.-EU monopoly capital and free up a surplus for sovereign industrialization, as well as to secure necessary domestic inputs for, again, an ecologically attentive form of Third World (and First World!) industrialization, moving to sustainable and renewable inputs where possible. This means placing agriculture in conversation with global planning the world over.

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