

Vishwas Satgar (ed.), *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*. Johannesburg: WITS University Press, 2018, 357 pp.

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Keywords

Climate crisis; Fossil capitalism; Counter-hegemony; Marxism; South Africa

This rich and big collection of essays comes not a minute too soon. Catastrophic climate change is becoming an ever more likely prospect. Each new scientific prognostication seems to narrow the window for radically decarbonizing our ecological footprint (currently set at 12 years), yet annual COP meetings have achieved no enforceable agreement, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. The volume is the third in an ongoing series published by WITS University Press, on Democratic Marxism, under the editorial direction of Vishwas Satgar, which stakes out a historical materialism that is non-dogmatic, fully historicized and open to other forms of anti-capitalist critique. Two other volumes (on *Marxism and Anti-racism* and *US New Imperialism and the BRICS*, respectively) are forthcoming in 2019.

The collection begins with a lengthy introductory essay by the editor, and ends with the editor's brief conclusion, which serves as an afterword. Sandwiched between are 14 essays arranged in three sections:

1. The Climate Crisis as Capitalist Crisis
2. Democratic eco-socialist alternatives in the world
3. Democratic eco-socialist alternatives in South Africa.

Beginning from the abstract-theoretical issues of climate and capitalist crisis and then moving through concrete-complex discussions of alternatives in the world and in South Africa, the book offers both a wide-angle view and an in-depth case study of a key carbon-producer state in the industrialized South. Combining critical analysis of the climate crisis with extensive discussion of alternatives that build toward climate justice, *The Climate Crisis* synthesizes critical sociology with public sociology, addressing both academic and activist readers.

The volume's contributing authors include university-based scholars – Patrick Bond, Alberto Acosta, Devin Pillay, Michelle Williams, Jackie Cock and others – and community-based activist-intellectuals – among them Dorothy Grace Guerrero, Pablo Solon, Brian Ashley, Andrew Bennie and Atish Satgoor. This diverse roster creates space for ample public-sociology

interventions, ensuring that the volume's analytical sophistication is not achieved at the expense of accessibility. Indeed, the 17 contributors share a sense of urgency, particularly as many of them write from a location where, as Nnimmo Bassey observes, conservative projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) portend 'a cooking Africa' (p. 192), with production from grain-fed agriculture cut in half in some countries by 2020. Deteriorating ecological conditions can be expected to increase civil wars, insurgencies and violent conflicts on the continent in the coming decade, swelling the number of climate refugees. As Bassey notes, the struggles for food sovereignty and for climate justice are integrally connected.

Key theoretical insights on the dual crisis of climate and capital receive extensive treatment in Vishwas Satgar's introductory chapter. He engages critically with the very mixed historical record of marxisms in the 20th century and insists on the need to place Marxism in dialogue with 21st century anti-capitalism – to shift away from the 20th century template of Marxism-Leninism, a faith in Promethean growth and a corresponding lack of ecological and democratic sensibilities at the core of the revolutionary socialist project. For Satgar, reinventing Marxism means holding fast to the basics of historical materialism but resituating nature at the centre (thus advancing a deeper materialism) while addressing the racism and sexism that are integral to contemporary capitalist regimes – all in a self-reflexive manner that refuses the closure of orthodoxy.

Satgar emphasizes that Marxism is a living, evolving perspective, and that recent breakthroughs provide a firm basis for moving from socialism to democratic eco-socialism. These include theoretical innovations – the Marxist critique of actually-existing socialism (beginning with Rudolph Bahro's (1978) *The Alternative In Eastern Europe*), the greening of Marxism in critiques of productivist Marxism, the rediscovery of the lost ecology in Marx himself (particularly in the work of John Foster and Paul Burkett) – but also developments in political practice embodied in the climate justice movement and related anti-systemic movements, which have fermented in dialogue with Marxism.

Several theoretical insights, carrying strong practical implications, struck me as particularly important. Satgar's concept of *imperial ecocide* directs us toward 1/ the imperial forms of domination that facilitate accumulation and 2/ the ecocidal tendency, in imperialist domination, toward destruction of the conditions that sustain life. Satgar sees ecocide as 'the barbaric dimension of capitalism that has existed since the beginning and is now bringing about the sixth extinction of human and non-human species at an unprecedented rate' (p 55). The concept of *false solutions*, which Dorothy Guerrero develops, engages both with climate science and with the 'corporate capture' of climate policies – 'solutions' that fail to address the capitalist growth imperative which is a generative cause of climate change (p. 34). These market-based schemes, carbon credits and the like, will not decarbonize capitalism, certainly not at the pace now required. They comprise what Devon Pillay calls the 'art of paradigm maintenance', through which hegemonic elites 'capture the critical discourse', empty its terms of meaning, co-opt the putative opposition into 'participatory' exercises while conceding minor reforms that shore up legitimacy (p. 153). Maintaining the paradigm means maintaining neoliberal hegemony within the field of

climate politics. As Nnimmo Bassey argues, false solutions are based not on lack of knowledge but on ‘selective knowledge driven by the neoliberal ideology’ (p. 205). Equally important is the critique of shallow ‘just transition’ solutions – job-re-training of displaced carbon-sector workers – and the alternative concept of a *deep* just transition. In Satgar’s view, the latter means 1/ addressing the multiple, systemic crises of capitalist civilization, 2/ shifting from capital’s growth principle to a principle of sustaining life, for the present and for future generations, and 3/ giving the transition a multilinearity, so that deep democratization occurs ‘at different scales, locales and tempos, in workplaces, communities, civil society, on the internet (cyber democracy), and throughout the state and public sphere’ (pp. 64-5). Jackie Cock adds the additional, crucial insight that a reclaimed, hybridized articulation of feminism, environmentalism and socialism can deepen such a just transition. In Cock’s view, each of these traveling discourses has been contaminated, and partly discredited in practice (as in neoliberal feminism, nimby-style environmentalism and Stalinism). Yet they remain crucial political and cognitive resources. Cock sees the deepening climate/capitalist crisis as an opportunity to pull the strands of resistance together in an eco-feminist-socialist project (p. 227).

These theoretical and strategic points are complemented by substantive analyses of the struggle for *alternatives*, with special attention to South Africa which, as a settler-colonial capitalist formation, has parallels with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. In these chapters, the resonating vision, emanating from Indigenous communities and the South, is that of living well rather than having more, providing the basis for a variegated yet coherent counter-hegemonic project that is taking shape in a wide variety of contemporary contexts. As Alberto Acosta and Mateo Martinez Arbaca observe, ‘*buen vivir* has been integral to a long-standing search for alternative ways of living and has been shaped by the struggles of indigenous peoples over the past centuries.’ (p. 133). Its foundational principles – reciprocity, solidarity, sustainability, interrelatedness, responsibility, cultural diversity, equality and democracy – are challenges to a plutocratic, globalized capitalism whose dominant pattern is social and environmental destruction (p. 137).

This project has deep roots in Native American, African, Buddhist and other precapitalist and now resurgent forms of communalism, yet it incorporates elements of critical modernism, of which Marxism is the most important. The synthesis is evident, for instance, in Acosta and Abarca’s insistence that ‘a new economic order that is in harmony with Nature requires a planned decrease in extractive industries’ that enhances sustainable activities in manufacturing, agriculture and other areas (p. 139). The starting point, as for Marx, is the human being, not the alienated labour that is capital. In the vision of a ‘restoration of the soul or the spirit in a caring world based on social and environmental justice,’ as Devon Pillay, invoking the Buddhist tradition, puts it (p. 159), the distinction between humanist-atheism and a spiritualism grounded in Nature is blurred perhaps to the point of irrelevance.

Exemplars of this alternative abound. Although *buen vivir* is perhaps the most well-known, the African ethic of *ubuntu* shows key complementarities. Christelle Terreblanche draws lessons

from the failed attempts by post-war African socialist regimes like Nyerere's Tanzania to revive ubuntu. In a new wave, *ubuntu* has been revived since the 1990s, initially in the struggles of Niger Delta communities against Royal Dutch Shell and big oil – which first enunciated the crucial post-extractivist demand to 'keep it in the ground'. At the core of *ubuntu* is an ethic of relationality: we exist only through each other and in organic relation with the rest of nature. This entails a practice of 'restorative justice...premised on strong self-governance of both communities and resources, intended to maintain harmonious relationships across generations with humans and the environment' (181). *Ubuntu* offers a vision of 'commoning' rather than enclosure, at odds with a way of life based on private property and profit, and endless growth. This ethic informs a number of specific projects, including Bhutan's Gross National Happiness framework for balanced, human-centred development, presented in some depth by Devon Pillay, as well as food sovereignty. The latter combines agro-ecology (synthesizing the best of contemporary ecological science with practical, local knowledges), the human right to food, the priority of local food systems and thus the decolonization of agriculture, as Nnimmo Bassey suggests (pp. 204-5). Connected to these is the project of *energy democracy*, emanating not from colonized communities in struggle, but from a progressive strand within the labour movement. Michelle Williams provides an important analysis of the links between energy, labour and democracy. Democracy, of course, is an essentially contested concept – liberal democracy on the one hand, is a mechanism of governance to generate consent and limit dissent; participatory democracy is 'a popular form of governing in which ordinary citizens actively participate in decision making...' (234). The former has been further hollowed out by neoliberal globalization and financialization. Energy democracy entails a double power shift – from neoliberal to participatory democracy, and from carbon-based energy to renewables, organized under democratic control. Williams points to emergent instances, both North and South, as in Germany's community-led shift to green, renewable energy and Uruguay's even more rapid movement, 'led by a democratic government at the national level pursuing a renewable planning agenda' (p. 247). These instances are important reminders that the scale of the climate crisis, and of the needed transition, far exceeds the capacities of local communities, which however, need to be active participants and drivers.

As is evident in these examples, *The Climate Crisis* bustles with an enervating mixture of critiques, visions and strategies. As Brian Ashley points out in his study of the Million Climate Jobs Campaign (whose Canadian version has been launched by the Green Economy Network), connecting these dots in practice requires a new political bloc, drawn from organized labour, local, community-rooted enterprises and social movements of the unemployed, 'enlightened and radical environmentalists and the potentially new organic intellectuals of the radicalizing student movement' (p. 290). Andrew Bennie and Athish Satgoor's chapter shows how such a bloc brings together food sovereignty and the elaboration of a solidarity economy, in defending, reclaiming and constructing the commons. Constructing an historical bloc for transitioning from fossil capitalism is a great challenge. In his afterword, Vishwas Satgar concludes that a resurgent eco-Marxist democratic left needs to deepen and broaden its analysis of crisis – to recognize the crisis

of capitalist civilization in its full dimensionality, to develop the practices of deep democratization that can pose a real alternative to imperial ecocide and its increasingly fascist tendencies. By implication, a democratic eco-socialist bloc will require a new kind of party driven by movements and citizens, avoiding the co-optation of mass power into the state, avoiding the reduction of politics to electoralism, and providing resources to transform the state as a terrain of democratic struggle (p. 342).

As I reflect on the diverse contributions comprising this collection three issues stand out for me.

First, I am intrigued by the contrasting analyses offered by Hein Marais and Brian Ashley, both of whom recognize mass unemployment (in South Africa hovering around 25%) and the climate crisis as key priorities. Inspired by the One Million Climate Jobs Campaign, Ashley sees climate jobs as central to any just transition, particularly since unemployment in South Africa is a leading cause of poverty. He advocates a two-decade transition to renewable electricity and transport in which ‘the state must take the lead and coordinate these efforts’ (p. 280). Marais also begins with the reality of mass unemployment, which inevitably will be exacerbated by capital’s drive to replace living labour with dead labour. But he advocates a universal basic income grant, raised through progressive taxation and set at a level generous enough to reduce extreme poverty (and thus the desperation that underwrites dangerous jobs and low wages) and improve levels of well-being. Such a reform would help workers displaced by the transition to low carbon (p. 92). Perhaps these are complementary, radical reforms that disrupt capital’s sovereignty, but in practice they may present a dilemma, given scarce resources.

Second, the various discussions of *buen vivir*, living well and *ubuntu* raise the issue of how natural-science insights – often seen and sometimes dismissed as ‘western’ – can be integrated into a critical consciousness that is radically humanist and ecological. My sense is that in rejecting promethean Marxism, we should not reject the crucial importance of the forces of production in our thinking and acting. But engagement with resurgent Indigenous thought can inspire a re-conceptualization, as we listen to the ecological voice already in Marx. Forces of production are, in an ecological perspective, not to be reduced to labour-saving technology (though that is part of the concept). Rather, they comprise the full range of relations and practices through which humanity is connected to the rest of nature, in which it is entirely immersed (Graham 2015). In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx included science as a force of production, as its insights are applied in practice. In our era, ecological science/technology, including climate science, is at the cutting edge of the forces of production. Since the relation between forces and relations of production is dialectical, part of the struggle for climate justice is a struggle over the forces of production themselves. Will a people’s science inform the creation and deployment of appropriate technology, or will a corporate science continue to enable business-as-usual? We can see the latter at work in such ‘false solutions’ as carbon capture and storage. How, then, can a democratic eco-socialism incorporate forces of production that capitalist modernity has stirred, *in creative synthesis with Indigenous and traditional ways of knowing?*

These ruminations lead to a final question. Notwithstanding the urgency of the climate crisis, contributors to this collection (along with many others on the green left) may underestimate the recuperative capacity of capital and its organic intellectuals to manage a passive revolution that buys time and reduces costs for transitioning to green capitalism. The Harvard Solar Geoengineering Research Project, funded by Bill Gates and Steven Cohen among other billionaires, is a leading example of such a program, set to go live in field experiments in 2019. It could launch as early as 2020 with two highly modified jets delivering sulfur dioxide to the lower stratosphere to slow global warming, providing a temporal fix as post-carbon energy replaces fossil fuels as a motor of accumulation. As Kevin Surprise (2018) has written, this is a scenario for passive revolution. Despite Donald Trump's climate denialism, there is evidence that the US Defense Department (which sees climate change as a national security and global stability threat – see Surprise, p. 1235) is on board. If carried out under US leadership, solar geoengineering might even shore up a flagging American hegemony in the global order. What would get left behind are precisely the counter-hegemonic, democratic eco-socialist alternatives advocated by the authors of *The Climate Crisis*. The Canadian government's 'climate plan', might, within such a transition to green capitalism, shed some of its incoherence. New pipelines will increase capacity to 'sell out' bitumen quickly, boosting profits for Canadian fossil corporations and financial institutions, while simultaneously developing renewable energy systems as a growth sector in the longer term.

My hunch is that, as the climate crisis deepens alongside a growing carbon footprint, geoengineering will become the focal point of hegemonic efforts to manage the climate crisis. A geoengineered fix along the lines of stratospheric aerosol injection would not do away with capital's ecocidal dynamic (as in ocean acidification and more generally the ongoing degradation of the conditions of production), and solar geoengineering has been deemed potentially dangerous on a global scale. It is not clear to me how the left can effectively counter such a move, so I can hardly fault the contributors to *The Climate Crisis* for not taking on this challenge. This quibble aside, *The Climate Crisis* makes a major contribution to critical thinking and acting on the most pressing political issue of our time, and deserves a wide readership.

References

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