

# The case for ecosocialism

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*Ecosocialism is an idea whose time has come*  
—Joao Camargo

The names and labels adopted by revolutionary socialists change over time and vary depending on circumstances. In the mid 1840s Karl Marx called himself a communist because, he said, that was the term used by the workers in the movement whereas ‘socialist’ was more favoured by the middle classes. But by the 1880s Marx and Engels were happy to refer to themselves as socialists, as in Engels’ classic text *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and by the time we get to the first decade of the twentieth century virtually all Marxists (Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, etc.) call themselves social democrats as in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. This changed in 1914 with the Second International’s support for the First World War, which led Lenin to argue for abandoning the label ‘social democrat’ in favour of a return to the original name of communist, the name later used by the vast majority of Marxist parties across the world—though it is worth noting that it took three years and a revolution for the RSDLP (Bolsheviks) to actually change their name.

The tainting of ‘communism’ by Stalinism resulted in many (though not all) Trotskyist and anti-Stalinist Marxist organisations reverting to calling themselves socialist as in Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative, Socialist Workers Network, and so on.

Then there are the terms and labels that are generally accepted or used on various occasions, even if not necessarily as a party name: Workers, Labour (party, league, etc.), international and internationalist, revolutionary, and left are all examples. Feminist is an interesting case in point. The likes of Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alexandra Kollontai would not generally have called themselves feminists, seeing feminism as largely bourgeois, and the term was heavily contested in the 1970s and 1980s, but now I think most revolutionary socialists would accept it, referring to themselves as socialist fem-

inists on the grounds that feminism has now generally become synonymous with standing for women’s rights and equality. The evolution of the terms adopted at various stages in the struggle by Black people in the United States (Negro, coloured, Black, African American, etc.) would make an interesting study in itself. The evolution from homosexual through gay, lesbian, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBT+, Queer, and so on is another case in point.

Against this shifting background I wish to argue that the time is right for revolutionaries and Marxists to describe themselves as ecosocialists. I do not mean by this that we should replace the term socialist with ecosocialist across the board or immediately change the names of our organisations (from Socialist Workers Network to Ecosocialist Workers Network, from International Socialist Tendency to International Ecosocialist Tendency, etc.), but that we should be happy to use the word and refer to ourselves in that way, as in having an ‘ecosocialism’ section on *Rebel*, holding workshops on ecosocialism, and affiliating with the Global Ecosocialist Network (as People Before Profit has done). The reasons for this are both objective—by which I mean the nature of the crisis facing humanity and the response it demands—and ideological—by which I mean the role the term ecosocialism can play in the environmental movement and on the left.

## The Objective Case

The objective case for using the term ecosocialism is very strong. Large numbers of scientists have accepted the proposition that the world has entered a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>—in which human activity has a substantial impact on the geology and ecosystems of the earth. Moreover, this impact has a negative and species-threatening character, rather than having a positive life-enhancing character, because of human alienation from nature caused by alienated labour and

the metabolic rift between society and nature brought about by capitalism. Within that it is clear that in 2020 capitalism has entered a new phase with the triple crisis of the Covid pandemic, the economic recession, and climate change, with these crises being interconnected aspects of a decaying capitalist system in which the contradiction between the forces and relations of production has reached extreme proportions.

If we assume that, with the arrival and dissemination of a vaccine, the Covid crisis passes (even if it is destined to return in the form of a new virus, as experts like Rob Wallace and Mike Davis expect<sup>2</sup>), recovery from the recession will only feed into and exacerbate climate change which, in the long run, will prove the most dangerous and intractable crisis of all. It is already producing large-scale fires and floods from California to Siberia and Bangladesh to Southern Africa, and this can only get worse. Other issues and campaigns come and go, but climate change, along with many other forms of environmental degradation such as the acidification and plastification of the ocean, is not going away. It is clearly set to be epoch defining.

Then there is the fact that the solutions to climate change, both for preventing it taking off catastrophically and for dealing with its effects (which are already built in and inevitable), are necessarily socialist solutions. Efforts to deal with climate change through market mechanisms such as carbon trading and carbon taxing are manifestly failing and inadequate.<sup>3</sup> Even the simplest real steps in the right direction involve a) government/state action and planning and b) challenging the so-called rights of private property and the priority of profit.

It is evident that the absolutely urgent task of halting the destruction of the Amazon forest requires, as a bare minimum, government action to stop predatory capitalists felling and burning trees to free up land for cattle and to prevent mining companies driving roads through the forest to open up indigenous territory for mineral extraction. Similarly, taking the essential measure of stopping further exploration for oil and gas deposits, i.e. 'Keeping it in the ground!', involves standing up to the lobbying and other pressures of the immensely rich and powerful fossil-fuel companies. Tackling the growing problem of the ever-increasing use of the private car necessitates a planned expansion of free

public transport. Switching the carrying of freight from the environmentally destructive lorry to the more ecologically sustainable train will not happen without the planned expansion of the rail network.<sup>4</sup> Reducing the massive carbon emissions from private houses involves large-scale retrofitting of homes, but that is beyond the incomes of most working class people; it cannot be done without a major programme of state investment. It is the same with the vast programme of afforestation that is necessary on a global scale. It will not happen on the basis of private enterprise or market mechanisms in a world where the 'value' of trees is only realised when they are cut down.

But even if we put all these examples together it still doesn't get to the heart of the matter, which is that capitalism is not only ideologically committed to endless (capitalist) economic growth but also inherently economically driven to it by the competitive pressure to accumulate capital. Only system change, that is the replacement of production for profit with planned production for human needs, i.e. socialism, can break this relentless logic of destruction.

Then there is the matter of dealing with the effects of climate change and the many other forms of environmental degradation. If 'the worst' is yet to come—and can still be averted—these effects, above all in the shape of increasingly frequent extreme weather events, are very much with us and are already catastrophic in many parts of the world. It is stark-staringly obvious that responding to raging forest and bush fires, devastating storms and floods, prolonged droughts and unliveable heat waves cannot be left to private enterprise, the market, or individual initiative. Even the most died-in-the-wool neoliberal politician can hardly say to the people of South Eastern Australia or California, 'Show some initiative! Get out there and fight the fires yourselves!'

But if a state-led response is self-evidently essential, the nature of the state/government will make a huge difference. Just look at the different governmental responses to the Covid pandemic, with Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, and Johnson leading the charge to disaster. In fact, we know from much experience that the response of capitalist states to 'natural' disasters is invariably slow, callous, inadequate, corrupt, and repressive. Hurricane Katrina and the fate of New Orleans is the classic example but the pattern is repeated again and

again; Hurricane Maria, which struck Puerto Rico and Dominica in 2017, was another dramatic case in point, and anger at the appalling handling of this disaster was a major driving force in the massive popular revolt in Puerto Rico in 2019. Of course, when the disaster first strikes and pictures of suffering children and destroyed communities hit the headlines, politicians and governments weep crocodile tears and make all sorts of pledges of support and aid. But the moment the news cycle moves on and the media spotlight switches elsewhere, such pledges are promptly forgotten and the victims are abandoned to their fate.

And again we know from an abundance of research and, indeed, from common sense that extreme weather events invariably hit the poor, women, children, people of colour, and working class people worst. The distribution of suffering reflects the general distribution of social inequality in all its aspects both nationally and globally. With the further development of climate change, the increasing frequency of disasters and unlivable conditions, including the dramatic rise in the numbers of climate refugees, will exacerbate all of these inequalities. The greater the levels of national and global inequality, the weaker a given society's health service and welfare provisions, the lower its average living standards, and the higher its numbers in poverty the more terrible the impacts will be. Only radical system change will permit any response to these conditions other than a barbaric one.

Thus the term 'ecosocialism', which signifies the necessity of a break with capitalism and a commitment to a socialism based on democratic planning to heal the rift with nature and build a sustainable future for humanity, is thoroughly justified by the objective circumstances we now face.

### **The Ideological Case**

There are a number of strong ideological reasons for adopting the term ecosocialism.

The first is that within the overall environmental movement there has been, in the last few years, a very considerable radicalisation, both among a layer of the movement's theorists and intellectual spokesperson's and its activists, especially its young activists. Both the global school strikes and the rise of Extinction Rebellion are testimony to this. In striving to engage with and

relate to such radicalising elements, as revolutionary socialists must if they are not to adopt a position of ostrich like sectarianism,<sup>5</sup> describing ourselves as ecosocialists is a very useful point of departure. For a start it signals that we are serious about the environment and not just 'jumping on the bandwagon' (which is what will be claimed by many of the 'liberal' and anti-politics elements in the movement). It relates to and builds on the popular slogan 'System Change not Climate Change' by moving to flesh out what is meant by system change (i.e. not just a collective change of heart but a change from capitalism to socialism). It gives substance to the calls, now widely accepted in the movement, for climate justice and for a 'just transition' since climate justice is fairly clearly impossible under capitalism, which oozes injustice from every pore.

The term ecosocialist also neatly signals a number of necessary demarcations. It differentiates us from what can be called 'government greens'. By government greens I mean obviously the leaders of the Irish Green Party and their supporters, who have gone into coalition with Fianna Fail and Fine Gael and are propping up a right-wing government, but also that whole layer of similarly minded environmentalists internationally whose strategy, even if they cannot yet fully implement it, is to become part of capitalist governments. This differentiation is especially important at the moment because, in conditions of global recession and subsequent austerity, government greens are likely to be seen by large swathes of working people as part of the establishment and identified with numerous cutbacks and unjust taxes, and it is vital that neither socialists nor the climate change movement as a whole allow themselves to be tarred with the same brush.

Ecosocialism also serves to distinguish us from both the ecomodernist trend that has emerged recently and the general liberal ethos that pervades the climate movement. Ecomodernism is a quite aggressive tendency that has developed in the U.S., particularly associated with Ted Nordhaus and the Breakthrough Institute, which argues for the abandonment of environmentalism as hitherto generally understood and an enthusiastic embrace of new technology, including nuclear power, so as to escape from climate change while permitting capitalism to continue with its 'endless growth'. Ecomodernism, with its unequivocal pro-capitalism, is

clearly music to the ears of sections of the ruling class and their supporters in the media, so the counterposition of ecosocialism to ecomodernism is a very important debate to be had in the climate and environmental movement as a whole, and would also help dispel the illusion that the issue of climate change is somehow 'beyond' ideology and politics. Making a positive case for ecosocialism is probably going to be a more fruitful basis for reaching new people than launching into strident denunciations of liberalism<sup>6</sup>.

Within our own ranks, that is within socialism, using the term ecosocialism signifies a break with and move beyond 'productivist' Marxism. By productivism I mean an understanding of Marxism which sees it as first and foremost a theory of the unending growth of the productive forces and a conception of socialism as embodying such growth, no longer fettered by capitalism, in pursuit of unlimited mechanistic domination of nature.

The attribution of such a view to Marx (and to Marxism as a whole) has been common in ecological circles, often in ignorance of the substantial body of ecological thinking in Marx, and on the basis of a very crude understanding of historical materialism. In fact, Marx's vision of socialism was never simply of the unlimited production and consumption of material goods under state ownership and control rather than private ownership. Certainly for Marx the establishment of socialist relations of production and the transition to a classless society was predicated on the achievement of a level of economic development which would permit a decent standard of living for all. Without that 'want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced', i.e. class divisions and exploitation would return.<sup>7</sup> But this level of material development has largely been achieved already under capitalism, if goods and wealth were equitably distributed, and was for Marx by no means the prime goal or ultimate aim of socialism. Rather for Marx socialism was to be the positive transcendence of alienated labour and its consequent alienation of human beings from the products of their labour, from their fellow humans, and from nature, on the basis of establishing collective human control over the productive process. If climate change and other environmental degradation should require as a matter of necessity that human beings reduce the over-

all level of their productive activity, in addition to redirecting it in ecologically positive ways—from fossil fuel production to renewable energy, from mining to afforestation, etc.—then socialism (i.e. collective democratic planning of production) would be the only way this could be achieved without immense unemployment, utter chaos, and human devastation. How removed Marx and Engels were from a simplistic belief in an unlimited capacity of humans to 'conquer' or 'master' nature is shown in Marx's observation that agriculture 'when it progresses spontaneously and is not consciously controlled...leaves deserts behind it—Persia, Mesopotamia, etc., Greece',<sup>8</sup> and Engels' that we should not.

however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons. Those who spread the potato in Europe were not aware that with these farinaceous tubers they were at the same time spreading scrofula. Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.<sup>9</sup>

But if Marx and Engels were not productivists, it is

nevertheless the case that an overemphasis on the role of the productive forces as the driver of history has been present in much of what has passed as Marxist thinking in the last century or so. It was a significant feature of the social democratic Marxism of the Second International (particularly that of Karl Kautsky), which tended to assume that the growth of the productive forces made the transition to socialism inevitable. It became a key element in Stalinism at the time of the first five-year plan and the forced industrialisation of the Soviet Union, and it passed into the 'Marxism' of many Third World nationalists for whom socialism became synonymous with economic development and industrialisation. It also existed as a tendency in the thinking of various strands of Trotskyism, particularly when Trotskyists argued that Russia's economic growth in the thirties, forties and fifties showed that it remained a workers' state. The term ecosocialism signals a break with such thinking that is both necessary in itself and helpful in relating to environmentalists.

Finally there is the role that ecosocialism may possibly be able to play in the future regeneration and reconstitution of the revolutionary left. Any honest survey of the left internationally is confronted with the brutal fact that the forces of revolutionary socialism, above all revolutionary socialist organisations, are exceedingly weak and fragmented. In many countries they barely exist at all. In a number of countries there are three or four or more very small groups with, at least to the outside world, very similar politics. Almost everywhere revolutionary socialists are isolated from the mass of the working class. How can this situation be remedied, bearing in mind that remedying it is vital given the cataclysmic times we are entering?

I do not think it can be remedied simply by regrouping or uniting existing warring groups. In some specific cases fusions may be beneficial, but generally even getting all the groups in one country into one organisation would not produce a party with significant roots in the working class, and would run the risk of a permanent factional bun fight. One possible way forward may be that in the course of major upheavals one particular existing revolutionary organisation, or even a new revolutionary formation, makes the breakthrough to mass or even large-scale support and this then resets the terrain internationally. This, of course, is what happened,

in the most spectacular fashion imaginable, with the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution thus giving rise to the Communist International. In recent years something like this has only happened with left reformist formations (Syriza, Podemos, Corbynism, the Sanders campaign), which have all fairly rapidly failed or disappointed.

Another route out of isolation might be provided by the formation or emergence of transitional organisations with broad appeal and open to militant anti-system workers whose consciousness remains in some sense 'reformist', but under the hegemony of revolutionaries. This is how People Before Profit, with some modest success, has developed in Ireland, and it is perhaps a role that could be played by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) if it breaks with the Democrats.

There is also the possibility that some new and overriding issue will result in a realignment of the left, producing new points of unity and new lines of differentiation. This happened in 1914 and 1917 on the question of social democracy and syndicalism. The war and the revolution showed that many ostensibly Marxist leaders and organisations were in fact reformists and defenders of capitalism while many syndicalists, though wrong on the matter of the political party, were genuine revolutionaries who, as Trotsky put it at the time, 'really wanted to tear the head off the bourgeoisie'. The most likely candidate for such an overriding issue today is the existential threat, and the real experience, of climate change.<sup>10</sup> This may make it possible, at least for those who are not determined and inveterate sectarians, to overcome various 'historical' disagreements and grievances. I should be clear here that I do not believe it possible to 'overcome', as is often proposed, the difference between reformism and revolutionary socialism which turns out, in practice, to be a division between supporters and opponents of capitalism<sup>11</sup>. Rosa Luxemburg was right when she said:

People who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform *in place and in contradistinction to* the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the *same* goal, but a *different* goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society.<sup>12</sup>

However, it may be possible to move beyond whether or not Russia was a degenerated workers' state or whether Dave McNally or John Molyneux was right about party building or the debates on social reproduction theory. If so, the standpoint of ecosocialism would seem a good basis for such a realignment. This is not, it should be said, a scenario that is counterposed to the others outlined above, but it could interact with and complement them. In this context, the Global Ecosocialist Network,<sup>13</sup> founded earlier this year, is a modest but useful initiative. It is explicitly anti-capitalist and pro-socialist, supportive of mass mobilization from below, and committed against forms of oppression, but within that framework it allows for the exchange of ideas and the collaboration of socialists from different traditions, tendencies, and organisations (as well as those affiliated with none) from across the globe. In addition to its prime task of making the case for ecosocialism in the here and now, it may help prepare the ground for future collaboration.

## Endnotes

1 For a good analysis of this term see Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, Monthly Review Press, 2016.

2 See Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, Monthly Review Press, 2016 and Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters*, OR Books, New York, 2020.

3 For a detailed critique of the notion that capitalism will save the planet through capitalist methods, see Owen McCormack, 'Is Capitalism Saving the Planet?' *Irish Marxist Review* 19, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/255>

4 See Asbjorn Wahl, 'A red-green new deal in transport.' <http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/2020/05/11/a-red-green-new-deal-in-transport-workers-power-renewable-electrification-of-the-whole-economy/>

5 We should reject the idea circulated by some on the left that socialists shouldn't engage with Extinction Rebellion or other new and radicalising environmentalists on the grounds that they are 'middle class' or 'not socialist'. In the first place, most people mobilized by XR, etc. are white collar workers, not middle class, and in any case this is crass 'workerism'. Whether we go back to Marx and Engels themselves or the student revolts of the sixties, it is clear that a certain proportion of 'middle class' people, especially when they are young, can be won to socialism and the workers' movement and provide it, in Trotsky's phrase, with 'valuable yeast'.

6 For an attempt to put this into practice see Jess Spears and John Molyneux, 'What is Ecosocialism?' published by *Rupture* and *Irish Marxist Review*, October 2020.

7 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/cho1a.htm#a4>

8 Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 190, Cited in John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 169, New York, 2000.

9 Engels, 'The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man', <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/>

10 I have argued elsewhere that the timescale and nature of climate change will create conditions which make socialist revolution not only necessary but possible. See John Molyneux, 'Is there time for system change?' <http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/2020/08/21/is-there-time-for-system-change/>

11 This assertion that the political issue of reform or revolution cannot be fudged in no way precludes any amount of joint political work of revolutionaries with reformists in campaigns, united fronts, or within transitional organisations. Indeed, such joint work can be one of the best ways in practice of winning people to revolution.

12 Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, 75, Bookmarks, 1989. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/cho8.htm>

13 See [www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net](http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net), where it is possible for individuals to join and organisations to affiliate.