

WORLD CONGRESS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

# **Thematic Assembly minutes**

## **Ecological Transition, Green Capitalism, Degrowth Communism: Building Social Power for Climate Justice**

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### **Emanuele Leonardi**

Statement about the conjuncture: we live in a moment defined by an epochal failure, that of the green economy. This latter was a reaction to the 1970s-1980s conventional wisdom according to which the relationship between economic development and environmental protection is to be assumed in oppositional terms: either one, or the other. Starting in 1987 with the concept of sustainable development, and deepening throughout the 1990s - in connection with the global climate governance - the green economy suggests that ecology should not be seen as an obstacle to growth, but rather as a driver of it: in climatic terms, although global warming is correctly understood as a market failure, only more markets - think of carbon trading - can effectively solve the problem. If such conditions are met, the green economy makes a double promise: more profit *and* less emissions. After 25 years of implementation (taking the Kyoto Protocol as a symbolic date), what we know for sure is that profits have been stagnating (and, in any case, they have not met expectations) but - far more importantly - we know that ecologically speaking market-led policies have proved disastrous. So, whatever form climate justice will take in the future - starting from this world congress - it will have to depart from market centrality as the exclusive pillar of ecological politics/policy.

### **Alice Dal Gobbo**

I will start from Lele's observation on the failure of "green capitalism". This is absolutely evident, and increasingly recognised by social movements, civil society, and even (institutional) politics.

Nevertheless, it is also evident that the current responses to the climate crisis *from within* the system are still moving within that same framework – i.e. they propose "green" solutions that a) do not challenge the relations of production and reproduction that characterise capitalist labour and value – actually, they reproduce them; b) they move within the "promethean" idea of an all-powerful humanity that is

capable of “saving” a passive “nature” through the deployment of science and technology

Today, I would like to reflect precisely on this knot of transition, technology, and ecology, thinking about the material interdependencies that get articulated, and the forms of more-than-human coexistence that they foreground. I will move from a critique of technological innovation in capitalism, and towards their rethinking in post-capitalist and degrowth terms.

1. Among the main capitalist responses to the issue of climate crisis has been **technological innovation**. Humans are so powerful to bring about a catastrophe, they can also fix it (Anthropocene as “Master Narrative”), and with the same instruments. Here science and technology are the modern, patriarchal ones: materialistic and yet not material, abstract rather than concrete, dominative. Examples: geo-engineering, efficiency, “green solutions”...

But also, other models of socio-technical innovation such as sharing economy and platforms: the promise to reconnect social actors and make distribution chains lighter, more sustainable.

2. Despite their promises: huge failures in terms of **ecology**, but not in terms of accumulation and value

capitalist socio-technical innovation does not provide real alternatives because even if it proposes new technologies it does not re-shape the social relations of re/production and the imperative of profit and accumulation > they are still made for the economy to grow

Innovative green technologies often *add* to existing ones rather than substituting them (and reducing their throughput): they do not propose alternative modes of living and living-with

Example: cultured meat

3. Technologies will be a key dimension of revolutionary post-capitalist and ecological societies. But specific ones emerge within specific relations and reproduce them → “appropriate”, occupy, translate, etc. them? Or produce new ones

need a critical interrogation over their (a) rationales: why is this technology useful (and necessary?) (b) uses: how can it become part of everyday and societal practices? (c) access: are these technologies that favour equitable access on both sides of production and consumption, or do they reproduce power differentials and niches? (d) effects on socio-ecological relations: do they really imply better forms of co-habitation, e.g. reducing overall ecological violence, overcoming patriarchal relations, transformative inter-species co-existence?

4. Technologies for a post-capitalist eco-society should be developed as more-than-human commons. They accept the difficulty of establishing a boundary

between the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, technology and culture (or nature). Hybridity and openness are recognised and included in these technologies' designs, yet this is not the occasion for improving domination on the "other", but rather to promote fairer, more horizontal, relations that take into account biological, affective, material, cultural **limits** and **irreducibility**.

STATEMENT 1 – Sociotechnical innovation has been proposed as one way of promoting more "sustainable" forms of production and consumption within capitalism, yet this model has failed since it has been directed towards continuing growth and profit. Technology will be a key dimension of revolutionary post-capitalist and ecological societies, yet it should be designed in common within transformed and transformative social relations, shaped by intersectional concerns over: democratic design; equitable access; just gender, race, species and (post)class relations

STATEMENT 2 – Eco-technology, to be transformative, should:

- Question established and hegemonic material/energetic flows: our mode of living is simply incompatible with ecological limits
- Disrupt the colonial and growthist orientation of labour/technology nexus in contemporary in favour of more convivial, participatory and reductionist forms of human-biosphere metabolism
- Reduce labour and material throughput, but also re-shape the boundary between labour and "life" (de-alienation)
- Come from the margins: from the "minor subjects" whose bodies and lives are constantly involved in reproduction and/or excluded by hegemonic models of production
- Be at the service of reproduction and wealth (for most) rather than production and value (for few)
- Not use potentials of "hybridity" and "hybridisation" as an excuse for further and deeper domination of the biosphere and human beings
- Liberate time-spaces (material and immaterial) for life to flourish

## **Giovanni Ludovico Montagnani**

- 1) It is evident that mitigation forecasts in 'hard to abate' sectors, development of green hydrogen and carbon capture and storage infrastructures, are currently and will continue to be unmet due to their inherent lack of profitability. By their very nature, these sectors will never be as financially viable as emission-intensive alternatives, unless a high and global price is placed on carbon dioxide. To believe that this is achievable today is no less utopian than considering alternatives to the current capitalist economy.
- 2) Challenging the entire economic and production system in a world where the climate crisis is still struggling to gain recognition by the majority of the population seems nearly impossible at this point. The desirability of

eco-conscious choices, such as owning an electric car or generating energy from personal solar panels, is far more conceivable. Convincing the masses of the preference for a profound transition to a different world, one not only low in emissions but also fairer to the global south, remains an immense challenge for those dedicated to building a sustainable future for humanity. Thankfully living in a democratic world, we cannot ignore this issue.

## Andrea Pia

→ I will only deal with “type II denialism” (as per Lele’s definition). Fossil capitalism is fundamentally *unfixable* because:

1) Green growth and energy transition policies/technologies are either  
a) happening too slowly given IPCC framework/recommendations; b) introducing solutions that do not resolve the issue of the hard-to-abet industries (steel production and many other basic materials undergirding modern urban life) and therefore are meant to coexist with continuous if not growing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; c) fail to address the problem of versatility, portability, convenience, density and availability of fossil fuel: some of the most treasured public goods emerging from the crises of capitalism of the 60s are fossil fuel dependant (public hospitals operating 24/7); d) fixes are unrealistically optimistic as per what they can achieve or the reliability/finetune-ability of existing fossil fuel infrastructures: leaks are ubiquitous and largely undetected/under-reported (oil/CO<sub>2</sub> emissions do not sometimes spill over, they always LEAK)

2) when sustainable solutions are introduced these have large social and economic costs that usually fall on already marginalised people and classes a) See for instance examples in China/ SEA/Latin and North America/Africa → Dakota access pipeline example of the Faustian pact between continuous settler colonialism and fossil fuel capitalism.

→ If we take for a moment the perspective of *ecological economics*, the steady decrease of fossil fuel, energy, and material consumption of/from the “Global North” is unquestionably seen as a prerequisite for averting +4C Climate Change (which is the threshold of survivability for the majority of animal species on this planet) → see for instance Vaclav Smil’s latest book. Countries like the United States/Canada/Australia are massively wasteful economies whose carbon footprint cannot just be reduced by Malthusian forces/checks alone (i.e. pop decrease is not enough to credibly arrive at the carbon emission targets required, and lifestyle needs to change too).

→ BUT importantly degrowth is not just about lifestyle changes! Social movements, including those composed of social and “hard” scientists, are now articulating a practice of degrowth from the grassroots/below, suggesting that there’s much more

in degrowth than the refusal or re-modulation of consumption: within this movement, we see the re-politicization of social and economic production too. What should we produce? How should we produce? What is energy for? What kind of energy for what kind of work? If we consume, how to do so *justly*?

—> all these considerations here take their moves from a position of relevant privilege: white urbanities from the global north. While we can debate the relevant weight that different income groups can have viz the global carbon footprint, the reality is that emissions, ALL emissions, need to lower to zero, carbon neutrality is indeed another fantasy. So these reflections are also difficult to digest, given the magnitude of what will have to change.

→ Here I share some of the ideas that are emerging across these collectives and in the academic discussion over this “expanded” notion of degrowth, which centres around two main conceptual operations and three collective gestures to unpack degrowth into a larger set of considerations:

- 1) The technologies of capitalism are “zombie” technologies: they are not fit for purpose, they are intrinsically wasteful and forever tied into cycles of capital boom and busts (this includes automation) → labour should push the questions of our continuous dependence on these technologies and bring about autonomous/antagonist projects to “vivify” them, make products that are *minimally extractive, maximally durable, and minimally toxic after disposal*. RECONSIDER LOW-TECH.
- 2) The material legacy of capitalism (including climate change) is going to be with all of us for a very long time. If it is imperative we dismantle this legacy, it is also imperative that we learn how to coexist with it (**how to “inherit” this “negative commons”**) → Bonnet, Landivar and Monnin’s book.

A degrowth that is both *from the North and below* would proceed in the following way, by identifying:

a) things we should learn to live WITHOUT (e.g. fossil fuels; cheap flights and meat; plastic, the sacredness of private property; long supply chains etc)

b) things we should live WITH. FROM NOW ON (e.g. patrimonialization of nuclear waste storage sites; of mine waste; these are sites we should collectively preserve as a testament, *sites of mourning* for a disappearing fossil-fuel society and its many privileges → STOP MOURNING THE PLANET (see XR) MOURN FOSSIL CAPITALISM);

c) things we should live WITH, OTHERWISE (e.g. invasive species; viruses; animals; the zombie technologies of petro-capitalism → reimagine what to produce and for what social purposes).

## DEBATE

1) When we talk about the numbers of transition we must remember that we don't need to cover all consumption that we have now with green energy (this is capitalist narrative), we can reduce in many sectors (e.g. automotive sector)

*Still, at the moment the majority of energy would come from fossil fuels, need revolution in technology not only behaviours*

2) Aren't we going to hit the 1.5 target? The time is now to act anyway, focus on hope not only rage and anger.

*No conversation on degrowth in China or India, we must mobilise but not by 2030, need to look in a longer timespan: how do we affect the transition? how do we emotionally distance from capitalism?*

3) Subtract work from capital reproduction and move it towards ecological transition and anti-capitalist struggle.

1) Critique to necessity of industrial agriculture in contemporary society. Agroecology more productive per hectare but less per labour power, so more expensive

2) Problem with trade unions and ecology: what about the workers' positions before becoming part of processes of politicisation?

Challenge: what example are we giving? It's true that 1% is responsible, but how to take the 99% with us? What energy are we all using? What are we eating? Cannot talk about changing the system without changing practices.

Manifesto for radical ecological art article about technological solutions.

Technosolutions (capitalist) vs technologies. How are these technologies going to be part of our plan - different experiences and alternatives? Technology today is very capital intensive how to take this into account? What about technologies that hide labour behind (digital house servants).

We won't hit the target - what is the new climate will we stabilise in? Need to convince people now, action should be now. Agriculture: agribusiness is business not agri, so only money, this business is not to feed anyone. Technology co-opted by who is in power.

