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# Toward Democratic Eco-socialism as the Next World System

*By Hans A. Baer*

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This essay is guided by two imperatives: (1) how do we live in harmony with each other on a fragile planet of limited resources, which have become unevenly distributed; and (2) how do we live in harmony with nature, particularly as humanity lurches forward into an era of potentially catastrophic, anthropogenic climate change that to a large degree is a by-product of the capitalist world system. Social systems, whether they exist at the local, regional, or global levels,



do not last forever. Capitalism, as a globalizing political economic system committed to profit making and continual economic growth, has created a treadmill of production and consumption that is heavily dependent upon fossil fuels and has resulted in greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change. While capitalism has produced numerous impressive technological innovations, some beneficial and others destructive, which are very unevenly distributed, it is a system fraught with numerous contradictions, including: growing social disparities within most nation-states, authoritarian and militarist practices, depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, including global warming and associated climatic changes, species extinction, and population growth as a by-product of poverty. Even more so than in earlier stages of capitalism, transnational corporations and their associated bodies, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, make or break governments and politicians around the world, although the extent to which this is true varies from country to country. Although capitalism has been around for about 500 years, it manifests so many contradictions that it has become increasingly clear that it must be replaced by a “next system” or an alternative world system—one oriented toward social parity and justice, democratic processes, and environmental sustainability, which includes a safe climate.

## Reconceptualizing Socialism

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Numerous observers have viewed the collapse of Communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as an indication that capitalism constitutes the end of history and that socialism was a bankrupt experiment that led to totalitarianism, forced collectivization, gulags, ruthless political purges, and inefficient centralized planned economies. What these commentators often overlook is that efforts to create socialist-oriented societies occurred in, by and large, economically underdeveloped countries. Historically, Marxists or socialists have engaged in intense debates as to whether the transition from capitalism to socialism would occur vis-à-vis revolutionary change or more gradual change by way of reforms in various parts of the world. Revolutions involve sudden and radical social transformations and are often associated with varying levels of violence, as was the case with the American, French, Bolshevik, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions.



The efforts of Lenin, Trotsky, and other Bolsheviks to develop the beginnings of the process that they hoped would result in socialism occurred under extremely adverse conditions, including constant external threat. Although the Bolsheviks, particularly under the dictatorial leadership of Stalin, managed to transform the Soviet Union into an industrial powerhouse by the 1930s, a variety of external forces, such as World War II and the Cold War, and internal forces, such as a centralized command economy and a political system of one-party rule, prevented the development of socialist democracy. With some modifications, the model of bureaucratic centralism was adopted by various other post-revolutionary societies after World War II, starting with China in 1949. The contradictory nature of Leninist regimes imploded first in Eastern Europe in 1989, particularly highlighted by the opening of the Berlin Wall, and in the Soviet Union in 1991. In the case of China, its Communist leaders embraced capitalist structures as a means of rapid development to the point that some scholars argue that it now constitutes a state capitalist society, entailing tremendous social inequalities and environmental devastation. The collapse of Communist regimes created a crisis for many leftists throughout the world. Many progressives had hoped that somehow these societies, which were characterized in a variety of ways, would undergo changes that would transform them into democratic and ecologically-sensitive socialist societies.

## Democratic Socialism

Due to the shortcomings of efforts to create socialism in the twentieth century, the notion of socialism has been discredited in many quarters. This has prompted various progressive scholars and social activists who wish to preserve the ideals of socialism, such as collective ownership, social equality, and representative and participatory democracy, to refer to their visions of a better world in terms such as *radical democracy*, *global democracy*, and *Earth democracy*. Nevertheless, it is important for progressive people to come to terms with the historical discrepancies between the ideals of socialism and the realities of what passed for it. This is so they can reconstruct a viable global socialist system, with manifestations at regional and local levels, that is highly democratic rather than authoritarian, that



ensures that all people have access to basic resources, and that is at the same time environmentally sustainable. It is my assertion that what I term *post-revolutionary societies* or what some term *actually-existing socialist societies*, exhibited, and in some cases still display, positive features. They also demonstrated, or still show, notable negative features. Unfortunately, all too many of the negative features have been tragic and horrific, to the point that they have discredited the notions of socialism and communism in the minds of many people.

Authentic socialism remains very much a vision, one which various individuals and groups seek to frame in new guises. Numerous Marxian scholars have asserted that socialism is inherently more democratic than capitalist societies could ever be and, thus, democracy is an inherent component of socialism. According to Ralph Miliband in *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, three core propositions define socialism: (1) democracy, (2) egalitarianism, and (3) socialization or public ownership of a predominant part of the economy.<sup>1</sup> Although some areas of a socialist society would require centralized planning and coordination, democratic socialism recognizes the need for decentralized economic, political, and social structures that would permit the greatest amount of popular participation in decision making. Socialist democracy would involve not only democracy in the workplace but also citizen involvement in the operation of educational institutions, health facilities, housing associations, and other organizations that impact people's lives. Miliband envisions three distinct economic sectors:

- a predominant and varied public sector;
- a sizable cooperative sector; and
- a sizeable private sector consisting primarily of small and medium companies that would play a significant role in providing various goods, services, and amenities.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Idea of Communism*, Tariq Ali argues that twenty-first century socialism should include political pluralism, freedom of speech, access to the media, the right to form trade unions, and cultural liberty.<sup>3</sup>



## Eco-socialism

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In the past, Marxian political economy has tended to give, at best, passing consideration to environmental factors, but historically there have been exceptions to this tendency. Various Marxian theorists, including Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, E.P. Thompson, and André Gorz have served as precursors to present-day eco-socialism. Over the past three decades or so, various leftists have become more sensitive to the environmental travesties that have occurred not only in developed and developing capitalist societies but also in post-revolutionary societies. Indeed, John Bellamy Foster argues in *Marx's Ecology* that Karl Marx himself recognized that capitalism is in a *metabolic rift* with nature.<sup>4</sup> Eco-socialism seeks to come to grips with the growth paradigm inherent in capitalism and to which post-revolutionary societies in the past subscribed and still do today; a case in point is China. Foster, in *The Ecological Revolution*, asserts revolutionary change entails both political-economic and environmental considerations.<sup>5</sup> Eco-socialism has made some headway among Marxist scholars in China. Ariel Salleh, an Australian sociologist, has served as a long-time proponent of socialist eco-feminism and Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva asserts, in *Earth Democracy*, that all beings, human and nonhuman, have a natural right to sustenance, and that a just society is based on a living commons and economic democracy.<sup>6</sup>

## Democratic Eco-socialism

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The concept of *democratic eco-socialism* constitutes a merger of the earlier existing concepts of democratic socialism and eco-socialism. It is imperative that progressives reinvent the notion of socialism by recognizing that we live on a planet with limited resources that must be more or less equitably distributed to provide everyone with enough, but not too much. As delineated in *Medical Anthropology and the World*, a textbook that I co-authored with Merrill Singer and Ida Susser, democratic eco-socialism entails the following principles:

- an economy oriented to meeting basic social needs—namely adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, health, and dignified work;
- a high degree of social equality;



- public ownership of the means of production;
- representative and participatory democracy; and
- environmental sustainability.<sup>7</sup>

Democratic eco-socialism rejects a statist, growth-oriented, productivist ethic and recognizes that humans live on an ecologically fragile planet with limited resources that must be sustained and renewed as much as possible for future generations.

The vision of democratic eco-socialism closely resembles what world systems theorists Terry Boswell and Christopher Chase-Dunn in *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism* term *global democracy*, a concept that entails the following components:

- an increasing movement toward public ownership of productive forces at local, regional, national, and international levels;
- the development of an economy oriented toward meeting social needs, such as basic food, clothing, shelter, and health care, and environmental sustainability rather than profit making;
- the eradication of health and social disparities and the redistribution of human resources between developed and developing societies, and within societies in general;
- the curtailment of population growth that in large part would follow from the previously mentioned conditions;
- the conservation of finite resources and the development of renewable energy resources;
- the redesign of settlement and transport systems to reduce energy demands and greenhouse gas emissions; and
- the reduction of wastes through recycling and transcending the reigning culture of consumption.<sup>8</sup>

Democratic eco-socialism constitutes what sociologist Erik Olin Wright in *Envisioning Real Utopias* terms a *real utopia*, a utopian vision that is achievable but only through much theorizing and social experimentation.<sup>9</sup> As the existing capitalist world system continues to self-destruct due to its socially unjust and environmentally unsustainable practices, democratic eco-socialism seeks to



provide a vision to mobilize human beings around the world, albeit in different ways, to prevent ongoing human socioeconomic and environmental destruction.

While Stalin adhered to the notion of building “socialism in one country,” what developed in the U.S.S.R. for complicated reasons—historical, social, structural, internal, and external—was the creation of a highly authoritarian and draconian social system that made a mockery of the notion of Marxian socialism. In keeping with Trotsky’s notion of the “permanent revolution,” the creation of socialism requires a global process, the beginnings of which we may be seeing rekindled in the guise of the Bolivarian Revolution in Latin America (albeit an experiment with numerous contradictions) and the emergence of new left parties in Europe, particularly Syriza in Greece which came to power earlier in 2015 and Die Linke, the farthest left party in the German *Bundestag*. As global capitalism continues to find itself in economic and ecological crisis as it lurches into the twenty-first century, humanity faces the challenge of how to shift from an ongoing trajectory of human and planetary destruction. As the existing capitalist world system continues to self-destruct due to its socially unjust and environmentally unsustainable practices, democratic eco-socialism provides a radical vision to mobilize people around the world to struggle for the next system.

Anti-systemic movements are sure to be a permanent feature of the world’s political landscape so long as capitalism remains a hegemonic political-economic system. Various anti-systemic movements, particularly the labor, ethnic and indigenous rights, women’s, anti-corporate globalization, peace, environmental, and climate movements, have an important role to play in creating a socio-ecological revolution committed to both social justice and environmental sustainability. Anti-systemic movements are a crucial component of moving humanity to an alternative world system, but the process is a tedious and convoluted one with no guarantees, especially in light of the disparate nature of these movements.

## Transitional System-Challenging Reforms

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Reforms, despite the best of intentions, are often problematic in that they may serve to stabilize capitalism, as has repeatedly been the case around the world. In





light of this reality, André Gorz in *Socialism and Revolution* differentiates between “reformist reforms” and “non-reformist reforms.”<sup>10</sup> He uses the term reformist reform to designate the conscious implementation of minor material improvements that avoid any alteration of the basic structure in the existing social system. Between the poles of reformist reform and complete structural transformation, Gorz identifies a category of applied work that he labels non-reformist reform. Here he refers to efforts aimed at making permanent changes in the social alignment of power. In reality, the distinction between these two types of reforms is sometimes hard to distinguish. But one distinction might be whether they are initiated by the powers-that-be or whether they are initiated by the working class, various other subaltern groups, or anti-systemic social movements.

The transition toward a democratic eco-socialist world system is not guaranteed and will require a tedious, even convoluted path that anti-systemic movements will have to play a central role in creating. Marx viewed blueprints as a distraction from the political tasks that needed to be undertaken in the present moment and, indeed, pressing issues are paramount. But history tells us that there always will be immediate struggles that must be addressed. I often find that when people ask me what it would take to make a transition to a democratic eco-socialist world system, they are seeking some basic guidelines on how to move forward beyond merely bumbling along haphazardly a step at a time.

While not seeking to create a blueprint per se for creating an alternative world system, which will be manifested in different ways in the many societies around the world, in this essay I delineate the following system-challenging reforms to facilitate a transition from the present existing capitalist world system to a democratic eco-socialist world system:

- creating new progressive, anti-capitalist parties designed to capture the state;
- implementing greenhouse gas emissions taxes at the sites of production that include measures to protect low-income people;
- increasing public ownership, socialization, or nationalization in various means of production;





- ✦ expanding social equality within and between nation-states and achieving a sustainable global population;
- ✦ building workers' democracy;
- ✦ creating meaningful work and shortening the work week;
- ✦ achieving a net-zero-growth economy;
- ✦ adopting energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, and green jobs;
- ✦ expanding public transportation and massively diminishing reliance on private motor vehicles and air travel;
- ✦ developing sustainable food production and forestry;
- ✦ resisting the culture of consumption and adoption of sustainable and meaningful consumption;
- ✦ introducing sustainable trade; and
- ✦ building sustainable settlement patterns and local communities.

These transitional steps constitute loose guidelines for shifting human societies or countries toward democratic eco-socialism and a safe climate. But it is important to note that both of these phenomena will entail a global effort, including the creation of a progressive global climate governance regime. My litany of proposed transitional reforms is a modest effort to contribute to an ongoing dialogue and debate as to how to move forward from the present impasse in which the world finds itself today. The application of my suggested transitional reforms will have to be adapted by many countries, both developed and developing, around the world. Furthermore, my suggested transitional reforms are not exhaustive of possible changes necessary for creating an alternative world system.

## New Left Parties Designed To Capture The State

The shift to a democratic eco-socialist world will require a revolution of some sort that will have to be played out in various ways depending upon the national context. Obviously the capitalist class and its political allies around the world will be resistant to such a revolution. The larger question is whether a democratic eco-socialist-oriented revolution can be achieved largely through peaceful



measures or whether it will entail violence, or perhaps a mixture of both, depending upon the country. Needless to say, there is no easy answer to this question. Nevertheless, while Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels indeed envisaged an armed overthrow of capitalism in some situations, they also gave attention to achieving reforms within the bowels of capitalist societies and viewed such efforts as vehicles for making a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism.

Ultimately, achieving most of the thirteen transitional reforms that I delineated above may require that new left or socialist-oriented parties come to power and in a sense “capture the state” and ensure that there is a political resolve that will guarantee their implementation. For example, nationalization of the means of production would be difficult to achieve without a leftist political party in power. Until the election of Syriza in Greece in early 2015, the possibility of new left parties coming to power appeared remote. However, as events have already revealed, the Syriza government faces formidable struggle in seeking to achieve its various demands as a member of the European Union.

But given the gravity of both the global economic and ecological crisis, including climate change, one should not rule out the possibility of political tipping points, just as climate scientists speak of tipping points that have set off a number of irreversible climatic events. In addition to Syriza, perhaps the most prominent examples of new left parties are the German Left Party (Die Linke), Left Front in France, Left Unity in the UK, and Podemos in Spain. In the case of my adopted country of Australia, I envision a new left party as consisting of disaffected Australian Labor Party-types, many Greens, members of various socialist groups, as well as independent socialists and anarchists. At some critical point, new left parties could theoretically merge into a global left party, a notion that exists mostly in science fiction such as in W. Warren Wagar’s *A Short History of the Future*.<sup>11</sup>

## Emissions Taxes

An emissions tax can serve as a progressive climate change mitigation strategy given the seriousness of the ecological crisis. It is imperative that humanity figure out ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions quickly to keep the planet in a



relatively safe climatic state. Much ink has been spilled on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including weighing up the pros and cons of emissions taxes and trading schemes. Unfortunately, existing trading schemes, including those in the U.S., the Kyoto Protocol, and the E.U., essentially grant corporations and developed countries property rights to emit greenhouse gas. The emission allowance prices under the E.U. Emissions Trading Scheme have fluctuated wildly, from a high of thirty Euros in April 2006 to three cents at the end of 2007, to thirty Euros during 2008, then down to 6.04 Euros in April 2012, and up to 9.80 Euros in August 2012.

Conversely, a carefully crafted emissions tax has the potential to serve as a transitional reform. James Hansen, a retired NASA climate scientist, has called for a steep carbon tax at the site of production as a strategy for quickly reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Ultimately, the record on the few existing emissions tax schemes found in various countries has been modest or mixed in terms of curtailing emissions or promoting a shift to renewable energy sources. Emissions taxes are, at best, only a short-term solution, and a market mechanism at that, and would perhaps not be necessary if energy production were publicly owned rather than privately owned, which is generally the case today around much of the world. Public ownership of utilities and mining could aid a rapid transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. What is needed are governments that exist not to prop up corporate endeavors but to seek to achieve social parity and environmental sustainability.

## Public Ownership of the Means of Production

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In an era of increasing privatization of social and health services, and even military activities and prisons, raising the spectre of public ownership, nationalization, or socialization of the means of production is taboo in conventional economic and political circles. Privatization is often justified in terms of economic efficiency. While state or government enterprises or services can be terribly inefficient for complex reasons, this does not necessarily have to be the case. There are numerous examples of publicly owned enterprises that operate relatively efficiently. Public ownership could consist of a number of social arrangements, including state ownership, worker-owned enterprises, and cooperatives.



It is important to note that public ownership or nationalization of the means of production does not in and of itself constitute socialism, despite the fact that people have often assumed that it does. For example, after World War II, the British state nationalized heavy industry that had been in decline for over fifty years, but retained previous owners in managerial positions. Australia historically exhibited extensive public ownership of various productive forces, not only utilities but also banks, manufacturing operations, communication networks, airlines such as Qantas Airlines, and transportation systems. Nevertheless, nationalization or socialization of private wealth would constitute an essential step toward the creation of a democratic eco-socialist society. This step would reduce the power of the corporate class and wealthy individuals to influence elections around the world through the support of selected candidates via campaign contributions, favorable media coverage, and even bribery. Derek Wall in *The Rise of the Green Left* maintains that eco-socialism is founded on the principle of common property rights.<sup>12</sup> What needs to be guarded against is the increasing privatization of water resources, supposedly in the form of public-private partnerships under which a small number of multi-national corporations assert that they are not buying or selling water per se, simply managing its delivery. The drive in many countries to privatize electricity production, communications, health care, and an array of services also needs to be resisted.

## Increasing Social Equality and Achieving a Sustainable Global Population

While some redistribution of wealth has been achieved under capitalism at various historical junctures and particularly in developed societies with strong labor unions and left-of-center governments, social inequality is an inevitable dimension of the capitalist world system. Ultimately, a shift toward greater social equality or parity will require transcending global capitalism and moving toward a democratic eco-socialist world system. Socialists have, over the years, engaged in intense debates about what sort of wage differentials should exist under socialism. Frank Stilwell in *Changing Track* argues that a 3:1 ratio of the highest to lowest incomes would be a tolerable standard for a socialist society.<sup>13</sup> In reality,



there are other compensations for work than material rewards, such as the intrinsic rewards of intellectual and even physical stimulation, and the sense that one has contributed to the greater good. Needless to say, as long as rich people and corporations exist, progressive taxation that does not allow for tax loopholes constitutes an important mechanism for redistributing wealth.

Many middle-class environmentalists who posit population growth as the principal ecological problem appear to want to maintain more or less their present material standard of living, albeit on a planet with far fewer people. However, in reality, bringing down population growth will require the eradication of poverty, which from an eco-socialist perspective should go hand-in-hand with creating a high degree of social equality.

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## Workers' Democracy

Workers' economic or participatory democracy would constitute an integral component in a shift toward democratic eco-socialism. Democratic planning needs to be part and parcel of the production process, such as in deciding what goods are needed and whether they are environmentally sustainable. Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel in *The Political Economy of Participatory Economics* delineate a model of participatory economics, which they call *Parecon* (a shorthand for “participatory economics”) that would entail a network of workplace and consumer-based councils.<sup>14</sup> Parecon, compatible with the notion of democratic socialism, seeks to fulfill four key values:



- ✦ **solidarity:** a solidarity economy should be based upon creating solidarity among workers and consumers;
- ✦ **diversity:** a good economy would take into account the wide variety of preferences and choices that people display both in terms of work and consumption;
- ✦ **equity:** an equity economy would orient production, consumption, and distribution towards achieving equity; and
- ✦ **self-management:** a participatory economy will be highly democratic in that workers have a strong input in decision making.

While Parecon has been criticized from various quarters for not being sufficiently sensitive to environmental factors, in recent years Albert and Hahnel have emphasized that, to be successful, Parecon needs to incorporate environmental protection and restoration.

## Meaningful Work and Shortening the Work Week

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Socialism is committed to the notion of unalienated, fulfilling, or meaningful work. Satisfying work contributes to positive self-esteem and a sense that one is contributing to society and one's fellow human beings. For most people, unemployment can be psychologically devastating. Even for people over the traditional retirement age of sixty to sixty-five, depending upon the country in question, work or employment can be a fulfilling and meaningful activity. A shorter work week would permit everyone to be employed and thus eliminate the "industrial reserve army," which is an inherent feature of capitalist economies but should not occur in a socialist system. What Juliet Schor describes in *The Overworked American* applies more or less equally to Australian culture, despite the stereotype of Aussies being a laid-back people.<sup>15</sup> Even though Australian workers pioneered the eight-hour work day, albeit in the mid-nineteenth century when the work week was six days rather than five days, many full-time employed Australians today are working over eight hours a day.

It is difficult or impossible to say what would be the optimal work week. To some degree this would vary from individual to individual. Marx characterized humans as *Homo Faber* or "Man the worker," but he was thinking of unalienated labor





where work and play are intricately interwoven, as is often the case in foraging societies. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels envisioned a society where one would be able “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.”<sup>16</sup> In a sense, working life would never totally end as long as a person had the mental and physical capacity, and the desire to engage in it. Thus, people should be given that option of phasing into “retirement” rather than simply going from full-time employment to full-time retirement. Work under socialism and particularly under communism will, in essence, contribute to human development and allow people to achieve their full potential.

## Achieving a Steady-State or Net Zero Growth Economy

A growing number of neo-Marxian scholars, as well as non-Marxian scholars, have been questioning the economic growth paradigm. For too long many socialists have, like mainstream economists and business people, bought into the growth paradigm. As a result, many socialists remained out of touch with serious ecological considerations. A serious redistribution of the world’s resources would ensure an adequate living standard for everyone on the face of the planet. But this would require a serious discussion about how much is enough and, with the elimination of poverty, the recognition that global population would begin to dwindle, thus placing less strain on the eco-system.

Obviously, there are large sectors of developed societies and smaller sectors of developing societies that need to undergo de-growth, except for the abjectly poor of developing societies and developed countries. Those, such as homeless people or indigenous peoples living on reservations in North America and Australia, need to undergo some sort of development in terms of access to nutritious food, decent housing and sanitation, health care, and education. Ultimately issues of growth, de-growth, development, and underdevelopment are intricately interwoven with the redistribution of resources. Following in part the thinking of Herman Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. in *For the Common Good*, I make a distinction between growth and development.<sup>17</sup> Growth entails utilizing more and more resources as part and parcel of the capitalist treadmill of production and consumption. Development entails providing all people with adequate food, clothing, shelter, health





care, education, and recreation. Under such a scenario, in order to improve the socioeconomic status of the poor, more often affluent people, including what is referred to in developed societies as the “middle class,” would have to reduce their current material standard of living.

Beyond a certain point, more food, clothing, and shelter are superfluous and certainly environmentally unsustainable. How much health care is necessary would depend upon each individual’s physical and mental state, both of which are not only interwoven but highly variable. Health can be defined as access to and control over the basic material and nonmaterial resources that sustain and promote life at a high level of individual and group satisfaction. In a socialist society or a society seeking to construct socialism, there would be greater emphasis placed upon preventive health care than curative health care.

## Energy Efficiency, Renewable Energy Sources, and Green Jobs

A crucial question is how much energy, regardless of the source, does humanity need. Given the demands of global capitalism to continually expand, under a business-as-usual scenario, humanity will need more and more energy in order to feed the treadmill of production, consumption, and population growth. In a steady-state economy, energy requirements could theoretically level out or even eventually decline. Energy efficiency is often hailed as a mechanism for transition to a green-energy economy, but in reality due to the Jevons Paradox, or the “rebound effect,” increased efficiency in capitalist countries is associated with increased economic growth and consumption, thus in essence cancelling out the benefits of energy savings. This is not to say that energy efficiency is not a desirable goal, but in order to ensure environmental sustainability it has to be coupled with a steady-state or zero-growth economy, which would be part and parcel of a democratic eco-socialist world system.

A shift to renewable energy sources—particularly solar, wind, geothermal, and possibly ocean wave energy—constitutes a significant component of climate



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change mitigation. A planned centralized economy has the potential to facilitate the transition to renewable energy sources. Solar photovoltaic cells and panels operate the best in sunny locations and have the potential to provide local power in remote areas, such as much of sub-Saharan Africa or even a developed society such as Australia. Large wind farms operate very efficiently in offshore locations, such as the Baltic Sea in Europe or the Bass Strait and Southern Ocean of Australia. Geothermal energy as a renewable energy source already exists in several volcanic regions, such as Iceland, El Salvador, Kenya, the Philippines, and Costa Rica.

While acknowledging their potential usefulness, various scholars have observed that renewable energy sources are not a panacea for mitigating climate change. Ultimately, the deeper question that renewable energy enthusiasts seldom ask is “how much energy is needed in the first place?” particularly in developed countries. A large-scale transition to solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources will need to be coupled with a decline in per capita levels of consumption among the affluent of the world, while allowing the poor to draw on these new energy sources to achieve access to basic resources. Obviously some people in the world, particularly the poor in the developing world, desperately need access to more energy but many of the affluent, in both the developed and developing worlds, need to reduce their energy consumption, often drastically, in order to achieve environmental sustainability and a safe climate. A shift to renewable energy sources will require an integrated approach in order to grapple, for example, with the issue of intermittency in particular with solar and wind energy.



Aside from the matter of renewable energy sources, eco-socialism needs to grapple with developing a “socialist technology.” The component parts of a socialist technology, to some extent, already exist in capitalist societies but are not actively promoted by capitalism because they are not as profitable. The technology already exists to make products that endure for a long time rather than products manufactured in such a way that they will break down fairly quickly, a case of built-in obsolescence. Bicycles, smaller cars, trains, trams, and buses, as opposed to large cars, all could be part of a socialist or an appropriate technology.

A shift to democratic eco-socialism will entail creating *green jobs*, ones that are not only environmentally sustainable but also cater to people’s social, educational, recreational, and health care needs. The creation of green jobs must be accompanied by a “just transition,” which means retraining displaced workers from obsolescent and environmentally destructive industries and enterprises to environmentally sustainable ones.

## Sustainable Public Transportation and Travel

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In *Ecotopia*, Ernest Callenbach describes a fictional place situated in northern California, Oregon, and Washington State that has transcended cars.<sup>18</sup> Aside from the question of whether such a place could exist in the modern world, the negative environmental impacts of private motor vehicles require a drastic shift to sustainable public transportation. A new urbanism that seeks to make cities more liveable and environmentally sustainable has emerged around the world and has begun to permeate urban planning. Various cities—including Singapore, Hong Kong, Zurich, Copenhagen, Freiburg (Germany), Vancouver, Toronto, and Boston—are encouraging residents to rely more on public transportation, including trains, trams, and buses. A global movement to make inner cities car-free has emerged in recent years. Sustainable transportation would entail many other measures, such as limiting the use of cars as much as possible, making them smaller and more energy efficient, and even banning four-wheel-drive or sports utility vehicles (SUVs), except in special circumstances (such as in rugged areas) and drastically limiting air travel.



While shifting from cars to public transit—particularly intercity trains, suburban trains, trams, or light-rail systems—would serve to diminish greenhouse gas emissions, these modes of transportation are not a panacea. Much thought is being given to the best form of public transportation, such as train, tram, or bus, in urban areas, depending on the situation. Furthermore, there is the issue of connecting small towns and rural areas with cities. Measures will need to be taken to connect rural to urban communities and to provide public transportation, perhaps in the form of regularly scheduled minibuses in rural areas. Furthermore, it would be possible to reinstate passenger rail service that serviced rural communities in both North America and Australia at a time in the past when their respective populations were considerably smaller than today.

In capitalist societies, “time is money,” and this dictates rapid movement between places. Conversely, in a more leisurely-paced world based on eco-socialist principles, people might find slower train travel—although faster than presently exists in most parts of North America and Australia—to be a time to slow down by reading, chatting with fellow passengers, enjoying the passing countryside, reflecting, and even sleeping. A more sustainable form of vacationing or holidaying would entail trips much closer to home, by train or bus, if possible rather than to distant places either by plane or car. Cheap package holidays by airplane could become a thing of the past. A simpler way would also entail a disposal of or minimizing the use of private motor vehicles and reliance on alternative modes of transportation, including simply walking and cycling. Airships would constitute a form of slow travel given that they travel at speeds of 150 to 200 kilometres per hour. Transoceanic ships could make considerable use of wind power through the use of kites or solid sails. Teleconferencing also has the potential to eliminate or reduce much air travel for the purpose of conducting business or attending conferences.

## Sustainable Food Production and Forestry

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A shift in food production away from heavy reliance on meat, particularly livestock, to organic farming, vegetarianism, and even veganism would be more environmentally sustainable and an important form of climate change mitigation. Drastic reduction of current forms of meat consumption and dairy production



would greatly decrease emissions from food production, as well as health problems. Small-scale organic farming tends to be more fuel efficient than industrial agriculture, which relies heavily on petroleum, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. All farming requires water, but livestock production requires much more water than does growing crops. There is a strong need to shift toward agro-ecology, which relies upon farmers' extensive knowledge of local ecosystems and seeks to transcend dependence on chemical, oil-based agriculture. Crops such as maize, wheat, sorghum, millet, and vegetables can be grown in forested areas that provide shade, improve water availability, prevent soil erosion, and add nitrogen to soils.

Agro-forestry blends trees and shrubs with perennial crops and the production of cattle, poultry, and other animals. The Coalition for Rainforest Nations campaigns for cash incentives to be offered to developing countries if they agree to conserve their forests. Permaculture, which is a contraction for "permanent agriculture," a term coined by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, seeks to integrate concepts from organic farming, sustainable forestry, no-till management, and the village design techniques of indigenous peoples. A shift toward vegetarianism could reverse deforestation for cattle production in the Amazon Basin with most of the meat being consumed not by Latin Americans but by Europeans and North Americans.

There is an urgent need to expand upon the urban farming that already exists in many parts of the world, particularly the developing world. Laws that prohibit farming in cities need to be repealed. Much urban farming can be done on rooftops, perhaps coupled with strategic placement of solar panels. Despite the horror stories associated with the enforced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, Saral Sarkar in *Eco-Socialism or Eco-Capitalism?* asserts that the notion of collective agriculture needs to be revisited for a number of reasons, including economies of scale, particularly if it were based on decentralized planning rather than centralized planning that would not account for regional variation within a country.<sup>19</sup>



## Resisting the Culture of Consumption and Adopting Sustainable and Meaningful Consumption

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Obviously, all humans need to consume a certain amount of food, clothing, and shelter in order to sustain themselves. Capitalism, however, converts “needs” into “wants” through voluminous and alluring advertisement and as a compensation for alienation in the workplace and everyday social life. From an eco-socialist perspective, Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster in *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism* argue that a democratic and egalitarian economic system will have to limit consumption levels to significantly less than they generally are for most middle-class people in developed societies.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, at least in developed societies, resistance to the culture of consumption remains confined to niche groups. Jonathan Neale in *Stop Global Warming: Change the World* warns climate activists not to talk about sacrifice by ordinary people.<sup>21</sup> My comments of resisting the culture of consumption are directed primarily to the affluent, even the affluent in the working class, who turn to consumerism as a compensation for alienation in the workplace and in everyday life in developed societies. In reality, most people in developed societies and the more affluent sectors in developing societies will need to scale back their consumption of material goods as well as restrict the number of holidays to far-a-away destinations that they take.

## Sustainable Trade

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Over the past two centuries, global production has resulted in a tremendous cross-border trade of goods and services. While increased international trade has been enhanced by free trade agreements and lower transport costs, it relies heavily upon oil and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions in moving goods around the world by ship or airplane, as well as trucks and trains. Furthermore, while developing countries, in particular China, are often criticized for their increasing greenhouse gas emissions, an appreciable amount of this is due to the fact that developed countries are importing cheap resources and manufactured goods from developing countries. International aviation and marine fuels are exempt from international taxation schemes.



The global food system has undergone a tremendous rise in “food miles”—a measurement of the distance that sustenance travels from the site of production to the site of consumption. Vandana Shiva in *Soil Not Oil* maintains that humanity can reduce food miles by eating diverse, local, and fresh foods, rather than increasing greenhouse gas emissions through the spread of corporate industrial farming, nonlocal supplies, and processed and packaged food.<sup>22</sup> There is the need for the greening of shipping, which would rely upon solar and hydrogen energy-powered ships, sailing ships, and kite sails. Also given that large quantities of products are now shipped by airplane and truck, there is a strong need to revisit railroads and waterways as less energy-intensive modes of shipping.

## Sustainable Settlement Patterns and Local Communities

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Modern cities have evolved following, in large part, the dictates of capital with its need for manufacturing, financial, commercial, distribution, and communication centers, as well as the administrative demands of government bureaucracies. As they have grown, cities have gobbled up precious farmland and natural areas. Overall, cities are energy-intensive places on a number of counts, including in the operation of office buildings, industries, residences, shopping centers, recreational facilities, restaurants, educational institutions, hospitals, residences, highways, parking lots, airports, and so on.

While advocates of green cities often argue that urban density can serve to foster environmental sustainability, in reality the ecological and carbon footprints of cities varies considerably between metropolises in developed and developing countries as well as within cities, depending upon their residential patterns (e.g., McMansions versus slum dwellings) and modes of transportation (e.g., a municipality with an excellent public transportation system versus a highly car-dependent one). The ecological and carbon footprints of cities extend far beyond their boundaries because they rely upon resources from a large hinterland that literally encompasses much of the world. Various proponents of “sustainable cities” who maintain that increasing urban density contributes to environmental sustainability downplay the historical connections between density and economic growth.





Theoretically, cities have the potential of becoming much greener than they presently are. During the early twentieth century, various socialists and anarchists pioneered efforts, such as the Karl Marx-Hof in Red Vienna and the Bauhaus housing experiments in Germany, to make metropolises more liveable, both socially and environmentally. A new urbanism that seeks to make cities more habitable and environmentally sustainable has emerged around the world. It needs to make a much stronger effort to be socially inclusive and counteract gentrification, which marginalizes low-income people. Conversely, in a democratic eco-socialist world, there would be no poor people and differences in income and wealth would not be nearly great as they are in capitalist societies.

The development of green cities constitutes a highly imaginative endeavor, one that will require drawing insights from numerous disciplines and fields, including architecture, building construction, urban planning, transportation development, and last but not least the social sciences. There has been quite a bit of discussion on how to make buildings more environmentally sustainable through the use of green roofs and walls, fritted glazing, solar panels, and more efficient lighting. A green or sustainable city should include medium-density housing, easy access to public transport, and minimize reliance on automobiles. Walkability should be part and parcel of the green city, which would allow people to walk as much as possible to their work sites, parks, recreational centers, theaters, shops, and eating places and contribute to a democratized streetscape. Some psychologists have developed the notion of *eco-psychology*, which stresses the need for people, including urban dwellers, to have contact with the natural environment. Eco-villages, which are increasingly found in urban and rural parts of developed and developing societies, constitute pre-figurative social experiments that potentially are part and parcel of developing more sustainable settlement patterns. Urban eco-villages can reduce car dependence or eliminate it completely if they are closely situated to good public transportation.

Cities should be easily interconnected with others via trains rather than automobile or plane transportation. Also, there is the question as to the optimal maximum population of a metropolis. Some municipalities have become so incredibly



large that it almost defies the imagination. The world now has some twenty-eight megacities each with populations of more than ten million people: Tokyo has 37.8 million, Delhi 24.9 million, Shanghai 22.9 million, São Paulo 20.8 million, Mexico City 20.8 million, and Mumbai 20.7 million people. Obviously, there is no easy answer to this question because it depends upon the national context and notions of population density.

## Conclusion

The transitional steps that I have delineated constitute loose guidelines for shifting human societies or countries toward democratic eco-socialism. I do not purport that my suggested guidelines are comprehensive because undoubtedly others could be added to the list. As humanity enters an era of increasingly dangerous climate change accompanied by tumultuous environmental and social consequences, we will have to consider alternatives that hopefully will circumvent dystopian scenarios caused by ongoing socioeconomic, ecological, and climate crises if business continues more or less as usual. This essay proposes the imagining and creating of a democratic eco-socialist world system as a real utopia, not just as a vehicle for creating a safe climate, but a more socially just, democratic, and generally environmentally sustainable world society, as well.

As noted earlier, democratic eco-socialism rejects the capitalist treadmill of production and consumption, and its associated growth model. Instead, it recognizes that humans live on an ecologically fragile planet with limited resources that must be sustained and renewed as much as possible for future generations. While at the present time or for the foreseeable future, the notion that democratic eco-socialism may eventually be implemented in any society, developed or developing, or in a number of societies, may appear absurd. However, history tells us that social changes can occur very quickly once social, structural, and environmental conditions have reached a tipping point.

As humanity proceeds ever forward into the twenty-first century, our survival as a species appears to be more and more precarious, particularly given that the impact of climate change looms on the horizon in a multiplicity of ways. I often



hear climate activists in Australia say that we do not have enough time to transcend global capitalism to be able to create a safe climate for humanity. Thus, they argue that climate activists need to collaborate with more supposedly progressive corporate leaders and politicians in tackling the climate crisis within the parameters of the existing global political economy. In my view, combatting climate change and global capitalism go hand-in-hand. While the more enlightened corporate elites and their political allies may permit some measures that contribute to climate change mitigation, they will certainly not consciously permit the eventual demise of global capitalism and the emergence of a democratic eco-socialist world system. As I argue in *Global Capitalism and Climate Change*, green capitalism and existing climate regimes are not sufficient to mitigate climate change in any serious vein.<sup>23</sup> How can we expect the system that created the problem to solve the problem?

My own sense is that overall things will get worse, before they get better, and there is no guarantee that they will get better. Nevertheless, while the capitalist world system appears to be well entrenched, there are numerous cracks in the system. In his Commentary No. 205 of March 15, 2007, Immanuel Wallerstein argues that in terms of the foreseeable future:

I do not believe that our historical system is going to last much longer, for I consider it to be in a terminal structural crisis, a chaotic transition to some other system (or systems), a transition that will last twenty-five to fifty years. I therefore believe it could be possible to overcome the self-destructive patterns of global environmental change into which the world has fallen and establish alternative patterns. I emphasize however my firm assessment that the outcome of this transition is inherently uncertain and unpredictable.<sup>24</sup>

Presenting a precise timeline of transition from the existing capitalist world system to a democratic eco-socialist world system is extremely difficult, probably impossible. It seems to me, however, that stabilization of the Earth's climate system needs to occur within the next two or three decades lest large swathes of land become uninhabitable for human beings as well as nonhuman species.



Despite the daunting difficulties that much of humanity currently faces and will continue to face over the course of this century, I think it is important that progressive people keep plugging away at challenging the system in their conversations, teachings, and writings while staying involved in anti-systemic movements by: struggling to create new left parties, pointing out alternative ways of organizing the world along democratic eco-socialist principles, and listening to critical input from other progressive perspectives, including eco-anarchism, eco-feminism, and indigenous voices, to mention only a few. Hopefully, as humanity finds itself in an increasingly critical situation, counter-hegemonic voices will receive a greater reception than they do now and will inspire ordinary people to become more politically involved in creating a much-needed new world.

Humanity is obviously at a crossroads, or perhaps more aptly put, at several crossroads: one being business-as-usual; another a shift to some variant of green capitalism that has gained much support among people somewhere left-of-center; and, finally, an eco-socialist vision that while muted at this point in time will become stronger as the need for it becomes more apparent to the masses of humanity.

*April 2016*

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Hans A. Baer is Senior Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Social Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. He has published 19 books and some 180 book chapters and refereed articles on a diversity of research topics, including Mormonism, African-American religion, socio-political life in East Germany, critical medical anthropology, medical pluralism in the United States, UK, and Australia, the critical anthropology of climate change, and Australian climate politics. He considers himself a scholar-activist who, over the years, has worked in the labor, environmental, peace, and socialist movements.



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James Gustave Speth, Co-Chair, Next System Project

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