**Zbornik**

# STRATEGIES FOR A JUST GREEN TRANSITION

Proceedings from the Summer School of Political Ecology 2025

# Strategies for a just green transition

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# PART I

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# Searching for a Socialist Approach to Crises[2]

What legitimises power under capitalism is called progress. Although capitalism has always produced poverty and under-development, it has been legitimised by the idea that 'in time' everyone will enjoy the fruits of progress. It only takes some policy reforms, a few more rounds of investment and some more development before even poor countries become rich, and poor people in rich countries become middle class.

But what happens to faith in progress when capitalism is in a sea of crises? How is capitalism legitimised when both growth and jobs are lost and companies go bankrupt? What about progress when we fear the climate of tomorrow?

The crises expose capitalism. Suddenly, we can see clearly how useless the billionaire celebrity speculator really was, how little politicians really knew about our society and how dogmatic the ruling ideology was. Crises reveal what lies behind the fine theories of market freedom and self-regulating economies. We see, in the words of Henryk Grossman, 'the chaos of the destruction of capital, the bankruptcy of firms and factories, mass unemployment, insufficient capital investment, currency crises, and the arbitrary distribution of wealth'.[3] Class interests immediately become more apparent. As quickly as ideology and pretty

words about freedom and human values disappear, self-interest and pragmatism emerge. Praise for the free market falls silent when the capitalist class needs support from the state. During a crisis, we have historically seen both the flexibility of the capitalist system and the desperation of the ruling class – two phenomena that should never be underestimated.

But, if crises really expose the nature of capitalism, why haven't 200 years of recurring crises sent the system to the dustbin of history? If, as Karl Kautsky said a hundred years ago, the recurring crises are memento mori – a 'reminder of death', that is, a foretaste of capitalism's final collapse – why does capitalism appear as alive today as ever? If, as Daniel Bensaïd argues, crises threaten to blow up the whole of bourgeois society, why does capitalism seem to draw additional strength and energy from each new crisis? If, as Jared Diamond argues, crises are *moments of truth* that challenge the ideology of progress, why does the ruling class seem able to use crises precisely to advance its positions, reinforce its power, and once again create a world in its image?[4]

That intellectuals can use crises to disclose capitalism is politically cold comfort. It is an illusion that a ruling ideology must be coherent.[5] Capitalism is not driven by coherent ideologies. In fact, it is not primarily driven by ideologies at all. The crises of capitalism come with a curious double character. While crises can – in theory – help us to reveal and expose capitalism's weaknesses and problems, they are also – in the actual political economy – central to the reproduction of capitalism. Crises are a good starting point for criticising capitalism, but they also make it harder to actually overthrow the system.

The crises of capitalism come with problems even for liberals. An old liberal dream is to maintain what is considered the sunny side of capitalism – growth, progress, optimism – and to be able to control or simply get rid of permanent and recurring disasters. One

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[4] Karl Kautsky, 'Finance-Capital and Crises', marxists.org (1911); Daniel Bensaïd, 'The Time of Crises (and Cherries)', Historical Materialism 24, no. 4 (2016), p. 14; Jared Diamond, Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 7.

[5] See, e.g., Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', in The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left (1988), published on versobooks.com, 10 February 2017.

can try to realise this dream in different ways, for example through active state policies and regulations (as with Keynesians and social democrats) or through privatisations and deregulations (as with neoclassical and neoliberal thinkers). Together, these schools of thought seek a world based on capital accumulation, growth and progress, where crises are controlled or eradicated.

This liberal dream has been shattered again and again throughout history. The dream of many Marxists is an inversion of the liberal dream. Here, the crises are supposed to lead to the collapse of capitalism and thus to the age of socialism. This hope has been dashed just as many times as the liberal dream of a world without crises.

While Marxist and socialist theories are useful tools for understanding crises, in actually existing capitalism the system is reproduced one crisis after another. For liberals, crises are theoretical problems with political possibilities. For Marxists, crises present theoretical possibilities, but political problems.

## Dangers or Opportunities?

Perhaps the most common definition of crisis comes from the thirty-fifth president of the United States. John F. Kennedy said in 1959 that the Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters – one (危, wei in Mandarin) meaning 'danger' and the other (機, ji) meaning 'opportunity' – and this great wisdom has been repeated innumerable times. In a modern take on the climate crisis, Al Gore said in 2015, 'We all live on the same planet. We all face the same dangers and the same opportunities; we share the same responsibility for charting our course into the future.'[6]

The idea that we all face roughly the same opportunities and dangers in economic crises is simply wrong. In the case of climate change, the same statement becomes morbid. (According to Victor H. Mair, a professor of Chinese language and literature, Kennedy was wrong even linguistically, as the second character

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6   Cited in Robinson Meyer, 'Al Gore Dreamed Up a Satellite – and It Just Took Its First Picture of Earth,' *Atlantic*, 20 July 2015.

does not mean opportunity, but rather 'incipient moment' or 'decisive point'. Thus, not necessarily a time for optimism or a good chance of advancement, but certainly a period of change.[7]

If crises really are opportunities, why is it a given who will lose? Because it is. It is (almost) always the poor who pay the price. Crisis as 'danger and opportunity' hides a class character: danger for whom and opportunity for whom? For the ruling class, crises can indeed be opportunities.

The famous saying 'never let a good crisis go to waste' (often attributed to Winston Churchill) also comes with a class character. Try saying that to the thousands losing their loved ones in wildfires, heatwaves and floods, to the millions losing their jobs and homes in economic crises, or to young women and children being forced into prostitution. For workers, the poor and small farmers, especially in poor countries, crises are not opportunities to be 'used'. Crises are desperation, unemployment and death.

Despite the devastating impact of crises on ordinary people, it is not only bourgeois economists and North American presidents who have viewed crises with a degree of hope and optimism. The young Karl Marx was basically preparing for the fall of capitalism as soon as he saw signs of crisis on the horizon.[8]

Engels was not much different. In 1845, Engels wrote that the people 'will not endure more than one more crisis'.[9] But the next crisis in 1847, in the midst of the Europe of revolutions, quickly passed. Hope returned with the Great Crisis of 1856–57. Engels wrote to Marx in November 1857: 'Physically, the crisis will do me as much good as a bathe in the sea; I can sense it already. In 1848 we were saying: Now our time is coming, and so in a certain sense it was, but this time it is coming properly; now it's a case of do or die.'[10]

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[7] Victor H. Mair, '"Crisis" Does NOT Equal "Danger" Plus "Opportunity". How a Misunderstanding about Chinese Characters Has Led Many Astray', *pinyin.info*, September 2009.

[8] Sven-Eric Liedman, *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx* (London: Verso, 2018), ch. 14.

[9] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (Mansfield: Martino Publishing, 2013), p. 296.

[10] Friedrich Engels, 'Engels Letter to Marx, Manchester, 4 August 1856'. Reprinted in *Karl Marx*

Marx was working on the *Grundrisse* at the time and wrote in a letter to Engels that he was working like mad at night to finish the manuscript before the flood came.[11] Regardless, the crisis of 1857 passed without any revolution; there was no 'do or die'. Instead, the crisis was followed by a prolonged economic boom.

The young Marx's optimism did not come out of nowhere, and we can better understand this with a short return to the conceptual history. Milstein argues for a defensive reading of crisis developing during the seventeenth century, which can be linked to Hobbes's *Leviathan* and was about overcoming dangers and restoring a 'normal state'. In contrast, what Milstein calls an 'offensive reading' of crisis developed during the eighteenth century, with writers such as Rousseau and Thomas Paine.

This was no longer about retreating or trying to avoid crises, but, rather, about moving on to the next stage of historical development.[12] In this respect, the younger Marx is surely a child of the eighteenth century.

The older Marx gives us a very different approach to crisis, and according to Peter Thomas and Geert Reuten, the *Grundrisse* is the battleground for the two different perspectives.[13] In sharp contrast to all previous naïve optimism, the older Marx emphasised how crises functioned within phases of accumulation cycles and were components of the reproduction of capital.

Many Marxists never stopped hoping that crises would be opportunities, even with revolutionary potential. Environmental historian Jason Moore argues that, while crises are full of dangers, 'as the Chinese would remind us, they are also full of opportunity'.[14] If any Chinese have actually reminded us of this

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*and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works*, vol. 40 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, e-book, 2010).

[11]  See Liedman, *A World to Win*.

[12]  Brian Milstein, 'Thinking Politically about Crisis: A Pragmatist Perspective', *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015), pp. 144–5.

[13]  Peter D. Thomas and Geert Reuten, 'Crisis and the Rate of Profit in Marx's Laboratory', in Riccardo Bellofiore, Guido Starosta and Peter D. Thomas (eds), Marx's Laboratory, Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 312.

[14]  Jason W. Moore, 'Toward a Singular Metabolism: Epistemic Rift s and Environment-Making

very point, they have probably studied Western crisis theory. Moore subtitles one of his most famous texts 'How I Learned to Stop Worrying about "The" Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism'. It is not clear from the text what this means, but, elsewhere, he has argued that the fall of the Roman Empire after the fourth century and the collapse of feudal power in the fourteenth century led to a golden age in living standards for the vast majority.[15] This might be empirically true, but it remains politically irrelevant to speculate today about positive outcomes centuries into the future. For someone losing their loved ones due to crises, the prophecy that someone else's greatgrandchildren's grandchildren might benefit from the current disasters is hardly a reason to learn to love any crisis.

The general tendency throughout the history of capitalism is that crises do not tend to benefit workers and the poor, but there might be exceptions to the rule. One is the Black Death which, although it occurred before capitalism, is still a relevant example. Small farmers and the poor who survived the plague were then in a better position, but at the cost of having lost friends and family in a terrible mass death. Cholera made life terrible in nineteenth--century industrialised cities, but, arguably, contributed to public health measures and urban planning that gave workers a better local environment. Should we coldly ignore social consequences and consider plagues and cholera as opportunities for the working class? At what cost?

Concerning economic crises, the most common example of the working class advancing its position through a crisis is the interwar period. Certainly not everywhere, but in places like

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in the Capitalist World-Ecology', *New Geographies* 6 (2014), p. 16. For other examples, see Dan Cunniah, 'Preface', *International Journal of Labour Research* 1, no. 2 (2010), pp. 5–7; Salar Mohandesi, 'Crisis of a New Type', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 13 May 2020; Bob Jessop, 'The Symptomatology of Crises, Reading Crises and Learning from Them: Some Critical Realist Reflections', *Journal of Critical Realism* 14, no. 3 (2015), p. 246.

15  Jason W. Moore, 'The End of Cheap Nature: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about "The" Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism', in C. Suter and C. Chase-Dunn (eds), *Structures of the World Political Economy and the Future of Global Conflict and Cooperation*(Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), p. 285. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 86–7.

Norway, Sweden and the US we must ask: Did the workers' movement win *because* of the crisis? The working class had been strengthening its position and building its movement for years – was this really reinforced by, say, the Great Depression of 1929? These are complicated questions, to which we will return later in the book. Here we just need to emphasise that what we are discussing are possible *exceptions* to the main tendency.

The argument of crisis as opportunity can also be taken a step further. Some feel that it is only through crises that the left can find political opportunities. The 2019 and 2020 elections with Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders were often described as 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunities. Perhaps too inspired by Gramsci, some pushed the thesis of crises as decisive 'populist moments' and breaking points between different forms of hegemony: yesterday was too early; tomorrow is too late! Crisis is the only opportunity for real radical change; if we lose *now*, we need to wait forty to fifty years for the next hegemonic crisis. Fortunately for us, this is wrong.

According to the Swedish historian Kjell Östberg, economic crises do not necessarily create rebellion and radicalisation. Social struggle shows a relatively independent relationship with economic cycles and with long as well as short economic waves. If anything, there seems to be a negative correlation between economic crises and higher unemployment, on the one hand, and widespread readiness to fight, on the other.[16] Looking quickly at the twentieth century, we see that widespread protests seem to take place a few years *before* the crisis. The 1917 revolution came in a sea of wars and crises but took place twelve years before the great crisis of 1929; the 1968 uprisings came five years before the 1973 crisis; and the anti-globalisation and antiwar movements of 1999–2003 came a few years before 2008. Should we conclude from this that great opportunities always come a few years before major economic crises? No, that would also be far too

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[16] Kjell Östberg, 'Den solidariska välfärdsstaten och förändringarna i den politiska dagordningen', in Torsten Kjellgren (ed.), När skiftet äger rum: Vad händer när den politiska dagordningen ändras (Stockholm: Tankesmedjan Tiden, 2017), pp. 25–8; Kjell Östberg, *Folk i rörelse: Vår demokratis historia* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2021), pp. 65, 100, 150.

speculative. Having said that, we should acknowledge that social struggles certainly do not happen independently from political economic processes. But, rather than searching further for such historical relations in this respect, the aim of this book is to help us understand the nature of crises so that we know the terrain on which we will need to fight the coming crises.

Östberg finds it hopeful that waves of radicalisation are not determined by economic waves, as insurgencies are therefore not dependent on specific economic cycles. But this does bring further problems for the crisis-as-opportunity approach: if chances for radical change are at least as high during periods not characterised by crisis as they are during crisis, then every single day with or without any crisis is an opportunity.Here, the concept becomes politically and analytically meaningless.

The crisis-as-opportunity argument arguably peaked in 2015. Five years after the earthquake in 2010 in Haiti which killed around 230,000 people and left 1.5 million homeless, a writer at the *Correspondent* had the audacity to ask whether the earthquake wasn't also a 'fresh new opportunity'. Perhaps even 'the best thing that ever happened to Haiti?'[17]

Another version of the opportunity thesis is one that sees crisis and progress everywhere. Brian Milstein argues that social welfare institutions and human rights have been established and many ideas of socioeconomic justice have become mainstream because of, and in the wake of, economic crises.[18] The problem here is that because capitalism has created so many crises, and since major institutional changes develop over years, it is not hard to find a crisis that took place a few years before or after any important political decision. This does not necessarily mean that the crisis is the *cause* of the improvement.

If crises are indeed opportunities, should we hope for more crises? That would be ridiculous. The idea that crises are good because they open up opportunities for the poorest is just as absurd

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[17]   Maite Vermeulen, 'Was the Earthquake the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Haiti?', *Correspondent*, 12 January 2015.

[18]   Milstein, 'Thinking Politically', p. 142.

as the idea that the slave trade opened up opportunities for today's African Americans to become entrepreneurs and even presidents of the United States. Or that colonisation was an opportunity for the poor in India, for example, because it gave them buildings and railways. Only fascists or psychopaths would make such arguments. These are anti-humanist positions that calculate with – or rather ignore – the lives of vulnerable people. If opportunities – as defined in textbooks – are occasions or situations that make it possible to do something you want or have to do, and if opportunities – as conventionally understood – entail moments of excitement, optimism and hopefulness, and chances for advancement, then we must refrain from referring to crises as opportunities for the working class, the environmental movement or the political left . This does not mean we should not attack crises with all our might. We just need a different approach.

## Beyond Keynesianism

Throughout the 2010s, you could go to conferences where Marxists discussed crisis theory and how crises must be solved through revolutions and socialism. Then we all went home to our respective socialist parties and voted for Keynesian investment programmes. Why do socialists run to Keynes every time there is a crisis?

Costas Lapavitsas explicitly says that Keynesianism is the most powerful tool we have, even as Marxists, to deal with political issues in the here and now. While the Marxist tradition, according to Lapavitsas, is good at understanding and dealing with medium- and long-term problems, it cannot be compared to Keynesianism when it comes to short-term crisis management.[19] If Lapavitsas has a point – that Keynesianism is the best tool Marxists have in the face of crises – he has, above all, pointed to a major problem.

But, if crises are mainly possibilities for the ruling class and problems for the rest of us, and if the struggle for socialism would be easier without crisis, could we quickly solve crises with Keyne-

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19  Costas Lapavitsas, 'Greece: Phase Two. An Interview with Costas Lapavitsas,' Jacobin, 3 December 2015.

sianism and return to Marxism as soon as the storm is over? This is a dead end. Apart from the fact that there is no guarantee that Keynesian crisis management actually solves crises, the crises are so many and so severe that a left that mobilises a social-liberal approach in every crisis will be stuck there.

Keynesian crisis management may to a greater or lesser extent be directed at servicing workers and the poor, but, as with any inter-capitalist solution, it will always have to restore profits and reproduce capitalism. This is a prerequisite. And one that can be easy to forget. With arguments about state interventions, challenges to the power of certain capitalists and calls for grand reforms – add to this that Keynes himself was part of the legendary Bloomsbury Group – Keynesianism can offer a 'critical edge', a sense of radicalism, although it will always save capitalism, one crisis after the other.

It is easy to dismiss Keynesianism as liberal theory masquerading as critical theory. But, as soon as crises become concrete, things become more difficult. There are reasons why socialists so often grasp for Keynesianism in crises. Left -Keynesian approaches do seek to implement social reforms that can improve the lives of workers and the poor. Easing the pain for the working class without confronting the ruling class is, arguably, better than not easing working-class pain at all. If someone needs a crisis to vote for investments in public transport, this is surely better than no such investments at all. For socialists in the face of actual crises, there are seldom better alternatives on the table. Even for Marxists, this tends to be the least bad option. Keynesians may find it hard to admit the big truth: that capitalism itself is the problem. But Marxists find it equally difficult to know what to do with this great truth in the midst of a crisis.

Crises create shocks in situations where people demand political action. There might be much uncertainty in the air, but *something* must be done. The hypothetical alternatives of allowing the economic crisis to deepen or the climate crisis to escalate are, by most people, considered worse than those offered by the powers that be. The gravity of the situation – both how serious the situa-

tion is, and how little time there is to respond to it – pushes many to search for safe havens in less radical circles. We can call this the pragmatic trap, or perhaps the Keynesian fishing net: the left is caught between different choices, all of which are calibrated to reorganise capitalism. This is just as true for economic crises as it is for ecological ones. It is in such situations that the climate--conscious left bends its neck and says yes to people like Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden – because the alternative is Donald Trump.

On the one hand, a left that accepts Keynesianism as crisis policy is a left that keeps capitalism alive, which makes the system ready for new rounds of exploitation, accumulation through dispossession and destruction of nature. Given how often capitalism produces crises, if we do not find another approach, the left will be busy reproducing capitalism for decades and decades to come. On the other hand, a left that cannot handle the here and now of crises, that cannot speak to the social distress that crises produce and that operates only on a discursive level of revolution and smashing the system will forever be politically irrelevant. We still need another approach.

We can neither escape nor ignore the crises. I see no reason to criticize individuals or groups who try to escape capitalism, either by living 'outside' the system within urban centres or by moving to the countryside or into the wild. But the vast majority of workers will still be left in the coils of the crises of capitalism. As the crises of capitalism are global, they cannot merely be confronted at a local scale. There is nothing wrong with deep ecologists moving to the country and growing their own food, but this type of response will not solve the major problems in a world of 8 billion people. Local mutual aid responses to crises might ease some pain during a crisis and create community solidarity. There are many reasons to support, and indeed participate in, this type of response. But socialists must also look a few steps further. It is not only about surviving the crises; it is about stopping them.

Then there is Naomi Klein, who emphasises the need to remain calm in the face of shocks and avoid being carried away

by panic.[20] This might be wise advice for some pseudo-crises or in the face of conspiracy theories. However, crises are not only discourses; they are actually existing events that shake the world. The shock is real. When people see their jobs, housing and the earth beneath them disappearing quickly, the strategy of organising the masses to keep calm will hardly win. I have a softer spot, in this respect, for Greta Thunberg's 'act as if the house was on fire, because it is'.[21] We need to 'panic together', and we need organised socialist movements that bring our own shock doctrines and creative destructions into the ring.

A position that is very rare in Marxism is to try to ignore or disregard crises altogether. One exception was the Italian Communist Party in 1975, which declared that there was no need to dramatise the crises because they obscured the true state of affairs and made it more difficult to find solutions.[22] This never proved a very productive strategy. When the crises *are* the state of affairs, we need to face the challenge: we must confront the crisis.

## Towards a Socialist Approach

According to the Marxist economist Rikard Štajner, there are two cataclysms of mankind: war and crisis.[23] What Štajner is indicating is that we should relate to capitalist crises in the same ways that we approach war, hunger, slavery and so on. This approach I believe is fruitful. Crisis and its causes are something we must *fight against*.

Rather than opportunities we look forward to exploring, or moments when the fight for socialism is put on hold, the crises are problems we must solve. Štajner's linking of war and crisis is also interesting from a historical perspective. In the 1910s, the struggle for revolution was not just a battle between workers and capitalists in workplaces. It was also crucial to ending (or pre-

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[20] Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), ch. 11.

[21] Greta Thunberg, 'Our House Is On Fire', *Guardian*, 25 January 2019.

[22] Rikard Štajner, *Crisis: Anatomy of Contemporary Crises and (a) Theory of Crises in the Neo-imperialist Stage of Capitalism* (Belgrade: KOMUNIST, 1976), pp. 66–7. 40.

[23] Ibid., p. 190.

venting) capitalist/imperialist wars. Socialism in our time must be about stopping the crisis. Rather than hope and excitement, socialists should approach the crises of capitalism with rage and anger. Rather than opportunities, crises are the enemy.

Lenin said that war is not something you can end 'at will'; similarly, crises are not something we can choose to pause under capitalism.[24] Stopping crises requires something more radical than a few regulations or a more active state. Over a hundred years ago, those who opposed war sought to expose its class nature: Who was sacrificed and who supported the war; what interests did it serve; what historical and economic conditions produced it, and how did wars reproduce capitalism? In a similar way, we must expose the role of crises under capitalism.

A socialist approach to crises cannot be based on any naïve optimism that crises are 'opportunities', or sweet dreams that crises will provide us with the collapse of capitalism. We must start from what normally happens during actually existing crises, and an understanding of how *capitalism produces crises and crisis reproduces capitalism.* In this book, we will see that it is empirically far-fetched to call the crises of capitalism opportunities for the working class or the political left , and we will discuss theoretically how this can be the case.

The crises of capitalism are not moments of truth; they are battlefields. There are reasons why (parts of) the ruling class – not workers and the poor – tend to win these battles, and, in order to do something about this, we must identify the reasons. Therefore, we will in this book also examine creative destruction, the class character of crisis, crisis as shocks and panic, the relative autonomy of the state, and the role of nationalism, racism, fascism and war. And more.

That the crises of capitalism are social paroxysms means that they necessarily exist on different levels. So, then, must any socialist approach that seeks to confront the crises. On a general level, we must understand the nature of crises, how crisis

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24  V. I. Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution', in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964 [1917]), pp. 55–92.

produces capitalism and vice versa. We can call this a Marxist *crisis critique*. Once we know the terrain, we can start articulating more concrete socialist *crisis policies*, which are general strategies and programmes that socialists can use to confront actual crises. But, when a crisis hits, theoretical understandings and general programmes are insufficient. There is an urgent need for very concrete action. Socialist *crisis management* is needed to ease social pain for the working class and to bring the class character we prefer directly into situations of shocks and panic.

The aim of this book – standing on the shoulders of giants, in dialogue with comrades – is to explore what a socialist approach to crisis can look like. The scope is limited to crisis critique, with only brief discussions about crisis policy towards the end. This means that much more work needs to be done. I hope that some readers will feel a calling.

History has shown that crises are not usually opportunities for workers and the poor; but there is no reason to bend the stick too far in the other direction. This is not an iron law. It is a tendency. Our historical mission as socialists in a burning world is to make a monumental exception to this tendency.

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya[1]

# A Strategic Canvas for Degrowth: In Dialogue with Erik Olin Wright[2]

## Introduction

In order to build strategies for social-ecological transformation, we need to think about them analytically, in relation to the goals of concrete organisations and social movements we are part of. In this chapter, I set out a strategic canvas that degrowthers and allies can engage with, in order to identify priorities, tensions, and think about how to avoid co-optation in building their strategies. How are you pursuing social-ecological transformation? What kind of strategy would help you in doing this? What are its potentials, and limitations? How can you keep developing your strategy to amplify collective efforts for social-ecological transformation? These are some of the questions that this chapter helps to think about.

In what follows I will argue that degrowth strategies for social- ecological transformation (see Chapter 3) need to combine several strategic approaches, reflecting the plurality of degrowth as a movement. To support the myriad of bottom-up alternatives that are already out there, degrowth actors should put a special emphasis on strategies that build power outside of the capitalist

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system and be very cautious of those which merely seek to tame capitalism. At the same time, the degrowth movement should also integrate the strategic logic of overthrowing capitalism altogether. Concrete initiatives would benefit from being more focused when strategising, whilst critically reflecting on the choices made. This argument comes from a dialogue with the work of the late Erik Olin Wright. I build on his helpful analytical vocabulary on transformation and strategy but diverge from the strategic configuration he calls for, primarily by seeing ruptures from the capitalist system as an important direction for pursuing transformation.

The chapter will proceed as follows. First, I introduce three modes of transformation. Second, I outline the strategic logics associated with each of them. I engage with Wright in both sections, in relation to degrowth, furthering his analytical framework and showing where I diverge from his argument. I then suggest how the strategic canvas shaped through this critical dialogue can help grassroots groups to think about their strategies.

## Modes of transformation

Wright (2009, 2019) identified three modes of transformation: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic.[3] *Ruptural transformations* seek a direct confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures. *Interstitial transformations* involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power. *Symbiotic transformations*, in turn, are aimed at changing the existing institutions, and growing power within the current system so as to ultimately transform it. For Wright, these modes of transformation are closely associated with the revolutionary socialist, anar-

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[3]   Wright himself used different vocabularies to describe ruptural/interstitial/symbiotic transformations, such as "logics of transformation" (Wright 2019) or "strategies" (Wright 2009). In this book, when referring to Wright's work, we in the editorial team have opted for yet another term he used – "modes of transformation." It helps to describe how transformations happen, but does not equate them to strategies. Rather, particular and distinct "strategic logics" are needed to foster each mode of transformation.

chist and social democratic traditions respectively. Using a game metaphor, he connects symbiotic transformations to changing the rules of the game, interstitial transformations to particular moves in the game, and ruptural transformations to changing the game itself (Wright 2019). When we talk about degrowth, we are talking about social-ecological transformation, i.e., a transformation that aims to bring about two entangled outcomes – ecological sustainability and social equity (see Chapters 1 and 7). This is something to keep in mind when thinking about the modes of transformation and accompanying strategic logics. Let me unpack how each of these modes of transformation connects to degrowth in more detail.

The *interstitial transformation* is crucial for degrowth as a movement and might be seen as its basis. Indeed, degrowth is about resistance to the capitalist and growth-centric system, and building directly democratic bottom-up alternatives is one of the key principles for the politics of degrowth (Asara et al. 2013). This is also where many movements that degrowth connects to and can learn from are located (see Chapter 6). Climate and environmental justice movements, for example, express frustration with inaction on climate change or fight against the harmful industrial expansion. As such, these movements are locally embedded and horizontally organised interstices opposed to the business-as-usual approach that puts growth and capital accumulation first. The organising practices we consider degrowthian – which work for open relocalisation and repoliticisation, such as cooperatives and commoning – operate within the interstitial mode, too. Renewable energy cooperatives, for instance, offer a community-driven approach to producing energy. Democratically run and serving the needs of a community, they are interstices between the spaces occupied by fossil energy or destructive ways to bring in renewables.

Multiple interstitial actors are already engaged in social-ecological transformation and can be said to be paving the way for rupture from capitalism (Wright 2009). However, they have little capacity to fully address the problems they raise, such as climate change; while the alternatives they embody are on the margins of

the economy, often dismissed as "niche" or "unscaleable". Continuing growth and capital accumulation by all means, in turn, are supported by powerful agents such as corporations and governments, and the institutional settings created by them.

In view of this, the *symbiotic transformation* becomes important. Whether we want it or not, this is something we as a degrowth movement have to engage with in order to expand the spaces for alternatives, limit ecologically and socially harmful activities, and change the very systems that shape social institutions. Degrowth, as a movement, has been consistent in arguing for systemic change from below whilst making use of available governance and institutional mechanisms. Symbiotic transformation has already been flagged as something to engage with for degrowth, complementing and supporting interstitial transformation (e.g., D'Alisa 2019). The state and its institutions have been identified as key spaces through which symbiotic transformation in line with degrowth can be pursued (see Chapter 9). This can be done, for example, by attempting to influence policies and practices at different levels of governance (e.g., municipal, national, supranational).

To this end, various degrowth policy proposals have been formulated (e.g., Kallis 2018, Buch-Hansen and Koch 2019), and degrowthers have been part of collective calls to reorient policies away from growth. For instance, in a letter co-signed by many degrowth scholars, 238 academics called on the European Union, its institutions and member states to reorient themselves away from the logic of growth towards the aims of ecological sustainability and well-being (*see the Guardian 2018*). While this call fell on deaf ears, continuing efforts towards symbiotic transformation is important to transform the system from within. However, due to engagement with powerful actors and on terrains shaped by them, there is also a risk of critical voices being co-opted. Even if symbiotic transformation pushes the change of institutional logics, corporate actors could still remain powerful in shaping the new agenda, watering down the radical demands.

The role of the *ruptural transformation* has so far not been engaged with explicitly in the work on degrowth. This is in line

with Wright himself (2009, 2019), who analytically describes what this mode of transformation entails, but is sceptical of it. Wright refers to rupture as a complete and sharp overhaul of the capitalist system, and as a direct attack on the state. According to him, the twentieth-century examples of revolutionary seizures of power did not result in truly democratic, egalitarian and emancipatory alternatives to capitalism, which makes system-level rupture implausible for overcoming capitalism (Wright 2019, 42). While ruptures are to be cautious about, making sure that the means are in line with the ends, I would not dismiss rupture as a mode of transformation. Instead, I suggest recognising different scales at which ruptures can take place – so that they refer not only to system-level break of nation-states, but also to small-scale and temporary overhauls of capitalism. Wright (2009, 309) acknowledged the possibility of reading ruptures in this way rather than as totalising and concerning the whole system, though without elaborating on it further.

Understanding of ruptures as small-scale and temporary, I argue, opens an important direction for pursuing social-ecological transformation. An act of disobedience like blocking a coal mine – something that is endorsed by degrowthers – can be seen as an example of a temporary rupture that empowers and encourages other forms of action. It includes resistance, too, but goes beyond it by disrupting, even if only temporarily, the rhythm of extractive capitalism. Another concrete example of rupture consists of workers overtaking a factory and converting it into a cooperative, as has been the case in the occupied factories in Argentina (e.g., Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007). Such ruptures can be used to support and stimulate interstitial and symbiotic modes of transformation, and possibly create momentum for transformative change.

The three modes of transformation, as the illustrations in this section already demonstrate, are not mutually exclusive. For example, a network of small-scale renewable energy cooperatives can act politically by articulating and calling for the kinds of changes it wants to see in policies, thus combining interstitial and sym-

biotic transformation. Or, an occupation of a space can combine a rupture from business-as-usual with the enactment of interstitial alternatives (Aitchison 2011). Thus, these modes of transformation are not only compatible, but the different knots that are created when their entanglements are acted on are also key for pursuing social-ecological transformation (see Chapter 10).

Having connected the three modes of transformation, as identified by Wright, to degrowth, I next argue that degrowth, as a movement, needs to engage with all of them; with interstitial transformation at the core of degrowth practice, symbiotic transformation helping to expand the horizons for radical possibilities, and temporal and localised ruptures enabling radical change by taking power. Care needs to be taken that symbiotic transformations are not co-opted, and that ruptures are pursued cautiously, aligning the means with the ends.

# Strategic logics

In his last book, Wright (2019) connected the three modes of transformation to specific anti-capitalist strategic logics, aimed at either neutralising harms or transcending structures: *resisting* and *escaping*; *taming* and *dismantling*; and *smashing*. In order to visualise the potential of interstitial transformations and the different ways in which ruptural transformations can happen, I complement these with two additional categories – *building alternatives* and *halting*. By introducing each strategic logic and connecting it to degrowth, in this section, I set out a strategic canvas that gives a lens for thinking about *how to act* strategically (see Table 2.1). It is important to keep in mind that degrowth is not only anti-capitalist, but also anti- productivist, which will have implications for building strategies.

## Resisting, escaping and building alternatives

Resisting and escaping are, for Wright (2019), the strategic logics of interstitial transformation. Resisting is about raising a

| Strategic logics<br><br>Modes of transformation | Reducing harms | Transcending structures |
|---|---|---|
| **Interstitial transformations**<br>involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power. | **Resisting**<br><br>E.g. a climate justice demonstration | **Escaping 1 Building alternatives**<br><br>E.g. running an ecovillage without 5roader political engagement 1 building a network with others |
| **Symbiotic transformations**<br>are aimed at changing existing institutiona forms and deepening popular social empowerment within the current system so<br>as<br>to ultimately transform it. | **Taming**<br><br>E.g. a policy that establishes absolute caps on national $CO_2$ emissions | **Dismantling**<br><br>E.g. a policy that turns big companies into cooperatives in the 1ong-term |
| **Ruptural transformations**<br>seek a sharp confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures (these can be short-term or done in a particular place). | **Halting**<br><br>E.g. a disobedience action | **Smashing**<br><br>E.g. a factory occupation by workers |

Table 2.1. A strategic canvas for degrowth (building on but diverging from Wright 2019, 122, 124)

particular problem in one way or the other and trying to bring it to the attention of decision-makers, employers, organisations, or the broader public. Climate demonstrations can be seen as in tune with the strategic logic of resisting. While undoubtedly important, resisting does not in itself transcend structures and risks staying with the diagnosis of the problem without making the next step towards transformation (Herbert 2021). However, resistance, say, in environmental justice movements, can also create spaces for reflection on the meaning of a particular protest for the groups mobilising around it, thus going beyond just reducing harms (Akbulut et al. 2019, Singh 2019).

Escaping, in turn, is the strategic logic of interstitial transformation that transcends structures. Here Wright (2019) distinguishes between escaping as an individualistic choice – often based on prior privileges and the initiatives that escape capitalism for more collective and egalitarian living. It is only the latter that is part of his strategic logic of anti-capitalism, with intentional communities and cooperatives being possible examples. For him, the strategic logic of escaping "typically involves avoiding political engagement and certainly collectively organised efforts at changing the world" (Ibid., 177). In other words, while giving inspiring examples of living differently, initiatives that embrace this logic may be focused primarily on running their own community or organisation, while distancing themselves from wider collective action for change.

While I agree with Wright that simply escaping capitalism is not enough for bringing about transformation, I find labelling all interstitial efforts that transcend capitalist structures as only escaping capitalism problematic, as this downplays their transformative potential. Indeed, Wright acknowledges that interstitial initiatives can be building blocks of an alternative society, and it is this point that I would like to push further. By introducing the strategic logic of *building alternatives*, I argue that interstitial alternatives can go beyond escaping capitalism or the economy (see Fournier 2008), into actively and collectively building power outside of the capitalist system. For example, workers' collectives

or community initiatives, apart from setting an example by their own organisations, can be building relations and networks with other like-minded groups, and supporting them in various ways (e.g., Kokkinidis 2015; Sekulova et al. 2017). The strategic logic of building alternatives denotes politicised engagement within and beyond a particular alternative and can be seen as key for degrowth. The distinction between escaping and building alternatives also suggests strategic directions for degrowth as a movement, pointing to the importance of encouraging and creating spaces for the politicisation and engagement of those who are already following the strategic logic of escaping.

## Taming and dismantling

Taming and dismantling are the strategic logics that are part of a symbiotic transformation. Both are arguably needed for transformation and can be mutually reinforcing. The reduction of working hours – a policy proposal that is often discussed in degrowth – can be seen as an example of taming. It would liberate the time from work, without immediately changing this work itself, nor how it is organised and controlled. However, the time released can be channelled towards activities aimed at interstitial transformation, and possibly towards demanding actions that would support them, helping to dismantle the current system. Without taming, dismantling might not be enough. For example, dismantling practices, such as supporting cooperatives or locally anchored organisations institutionally, may be a drop in the ocean when powerful corporations are not tamed and existing institutions are still oriented towards growth. Thus, policy proposals such as those discussed within degrowth (e.g., Kallis 2018) or allied proposals like the Green New Deal for Europe (GNDE 2019) combine taming and dismantling. However, the balance between these strategic logic is something we as the degrowth movement should be careful about, making dismantling rather than taming key to our efforts. In other words, it is important that taming does not become a less radical compromise in the struggle for transformation.

The distinction between taming and dismantling is helpful to analytically discern how symbiotic transformation can be pursued, as well as to identify where the risk of co-optation can emerge when doing this. While dismantling without taming can be insufficient to bring about social-ecological transformation, it is possible to imagine taming being pursued without leading to dismantling, thus co-opting the efforts for symbiotic transformation. For example, in the socialist movements of the twentieth century, the more radical demands were often overtaken by those just taming capitalism. Wright (2019, 57) gives an example of Sweden in the early 1970s, where the left wing of social democrats wanted to put forward a policy that would enable labour unions to become the majority share owners of Swedish corporations in the long-term, which never happened in the end. Thus, the strategic logic of dismantling should be seen as key, with a bold vision for policies and alternative institutions that we would like to see. Taming, in turn, should be used to support and further argue for dismantling. For instance, in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategic logic of taming would consist of arguing for connecting rescue packages for companies to their future environmental performance. Adopting the strategic logic of dismantling would consist of demanding the kinds of changes that would alter the power relations in society, like support for workers to turn bankrupt companies into collective and not-for--profit ownership models such as cooperatives.

## Smashing and halting

The strategic logic of smashing capitalism – associated with ruptural transformation – is not part of Wright's (2019) vision for how to overcome capitalism. However, waiting for symbiotic transformation to bring the legislation and institutional changes that would support the transition of power from capital might mean that such transformation would never materialise, as was the case with the example from Sweden. Or, there would be no pioneering examples of occupied factories today had the workers not activated the strategic logic of smashing and organised to

take power. Such ruptural transformations enacted by the workers in the case of factory occupations have allowed for something different than what is done by alternatives operating within interstitial transformation: overtaking a space, sometimes huge, with infrastructure that can be used and repurposing this space through collective deliberation. Without rupture, the workers would most likely not have had sufficient resources to get hold of and equip such a site in the first place.

Once the strategic logic of smashing capitalism has resulted in a ruptural transformation and a space has been repurposed, it can become a building block for interstitial transformation, enacting the strategic logic of building alternatives. For example, occupying in an urban landscape – whether a house or a plot of land – as done by squatters (see e.g., Cattaneo and Gavaldá 2010), enables its reclamation from capital, whilst also opening the possibility of converting the occupied space into a commons. Small-scale ruptures can encourage others in similar situations to take power in the spaces where they operate. Moreover, having such examples in place and demanding their recognition can ultimately push for symbiotic transformation towards cooperativisation and commoning. Despite such potentialities, it is important to be aware that actions within the strategic logic of smashing can also be criminalised, punished or delegitimised by authorities.

The understanding of ruptures as small-scale and temporal adopted in this chapter means acting towards ruptural transformations does not necessarily lead to transcending structures, but can also be about reducing harms. This is why I introduce the strategic logic of *halting capitalism*, i.e., stoping destructive activities, even if for a short time, aiming to break the rhythms of capitalism, productivism and extractivism. An act of disobedience like blocking a coal mine can be said to be following the strategic logic of halting. It manifests a sharp confrontation with existing structures, while not transcending them. Actions within this strategic logic are in tune with degrowth (D'Alisa et al. 2013) and movements close to it, such as the climate justice movement. An occupation of a university to protest neoliberalisation

is another example (Aitchison 2011). While being a temporary act and likely not leading to a longer-term occupation, it aims to halt unjust actions. The strategic logics within ruptural transformation are most likely to be enacted in particular contexts when certain tipping points are crossed – for example, when destructive expansion continues despite the severity of climate change, when workers are not paid by their bankrupt companies, or when common people have to deal with austerity measures as a result of problems they had not created.

A degrowth strategy needs to combine several strategic approaches, reflecting the plurality of degrowth as a movement. First and foremost, it needs to support the myriad of interstitial alternatives that are not only resisting and escaping the logic of growth and capitalism, but are already building alternatives in the present. To do this, it should put a special emphasis on the strategic logic of dismantling but be very cautious about taming when pursuing symbiotic transformation. Furthermore, degrowth as a movement should integrate the strategic logics of halting and smashing capitalism, by disturbing the rhythms of business-as-usual, and by daring to take power when it is possible to do so. Pursuing ruptural transformation is particularly important and more likely to be ethically justified in times of capitalist crisis (Bond 2019), when the absurdity and violence to keep the current system going become more evident, and when cracks in this system may open spaces for expanding alternatives.

## A strategic canvas for degrowth and how to take it forward

The discussion of the modes of transformation and strategic logics elaborated by Erik Olin Wright (2009, 2019) and further developed in this chapter offers a comprehensive strategic canvas that degrowthers and allied movements can relate to (see Table 2.1). So far, I have argued for degrowth as a movement – characterised by a multiplicity of actors and voices (see Chapters 4 and

5, see also Barca et al. 2019 and Paulson 2017) – to embrace the plurality of modes of transformation and strategic logics offered by this canvas, emphasising where priorities lie and where it is important to be cautious.

Specific organisations that are part of or connected to degrowth, however, can be more focused on locating themselves on this strategic canvas. If you are an environmental organisation that calls for systemic change while working close to the institutions of the European Union, symbiotic transformation may be your priority. For example, you can be aiming at reshaping the EU politics away from growth through impactful reports and by shaping discussion in the EU spaces, drawing on and helping to render visible the grassroots voices calling for social-ecological transformation, as well as promoting the policy agenda that would make dismantling possible. If you are a grassroots organisation, say, running a cooperative in an urban space, pursuing interstitial transformation via building alternatives might be key to your strategy. Depending on the context, you may decide whether you want to also pursue symbiotic transformation. For example, if operating in a municipality sympathetic to your goals, you might want to find ways to push for policy changes that would help alternatives like yours to flourish. Or, if operating in a hostile environment or under an oppressive political regime, you may decide to focus on building alternatives parallel to existing institutions and get engaged in building counter- institutions with allied groups. And yet another example – if you are an environmental justice group seeing a forest at the risk of being cut for industrial expansion, engaging in the strategic logic of halting might feel like the only right thing to do, out of which longer-term ruptures and building of alternatives may also emerge.

Having identified your terrain within this strategic canvas, you can keep thinking deeper about your strategies, putting them into the context you operate in, in relation to your goals, and the broader aspirations of social-ecological transformation. While there is an ongoing multidimensional crisis (Brand and Wissen 2012), and degrowth presents an alternative political project, the-

re is so far little public support of it and no unity of different political forces calling for social-ecological transformation, which prevents a paradigm shift from happening (Buch-Hansen 2018). Thus, when crafting your strategy, you might go in the direction of building up popular support for degrowth, or into building alliances with other politically engaged actors. The primary purpose of some groups might be precisely to help forge these alliances and to connect and coordinate different modes of transformation within the larger movement.

As an actor within the degrowth movement, you may need to keep thinking about how you relate to institutions of the state, and the potential to push them from the bottom-up (see Chapter 9). Importantly, acting for social-ecological transformation, including devising your strategies, is not something static that is decided on once and for all. It is a process to keep engaging in, evaluating (see Chapter 8), and amending. Finally, in acting for change and strategically, it is important to stay true to degrowth principles, its spirit and multiplicity. To do this involves a particular approach: critically reflecting on actions for alternatives, being alert to possible closures and co-optations that might arise in the process, and being ready to address them while also finding inspiration and knowledge in different spaces – which has been articulated as nomadic utopianism (Barca et al. 2019).

To conclude, I hope that this chapter can help both degrowth and allied movements, as well as different grassroots groups, to think analytically about the mode(s) of transformation they pursue, and which strategic logics to mobilise. Many questions about the *how* of building and enacting these strategies remain, which this book will help you to think through, via theoretical reflections in Part I and concrete examples from different spheres of life in Part II.

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# The Method of Convergence: The Laboratory of the Ex GKN Dispute

On 9 July 2021, Melrose Industries announced the closure of its GKN Driveline (formerly FIAT) factory, which used to produce car axles in Campi di Bisenzio, Florence, and the layoff of more than 400 workers. While in many cases the workers and unions would settle for negotiating enhanced redundancy benefits, the GKN Factory Collective took over the plants and kickstarted a long struggle against decommissioning. However, what makes the Ex GKN dispute really unique is the strategy adopted by the workers. They sealed an alliance with the climate justice movement by drafting a conversion plan for sustainable, public transport and demanding its adoption, as part of a broader vision for a worker-led ecological transition. This engendered a cycle of broad mass mobilisations, repeatedly bringing tens of thousands to the streets. Four years later, the dispute remains open. While the workers have been laid off in April 2025, the permanent sit-in at the factory continues and the GKN Factory Collective still demands the ecological conversion of the site through their plan to set up a cooperative for the production of cargo bikes and solar panels. This project is currently seeking material solidarity. Over one million euros have been collected by the popular shareholding campaign to launch the cooperative, with a new target of two millions. All information on how to join can be found at *Insorgiamo.org.* The original version of this article, in Italian, was published in the first issue of the online magazine *Teiko.*

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From the work stoppages to avoid COVID-19 exposure to the "climate strikes" against extreme heat in the workplaces, we have seen an updating of the iconic experiences of working-class environmentalism we inherited from the Long 1968, which were rooted not in abstract ideals of nature conservation but in the material urgency of improving living conditions in communities and workplaces.[2] Italy's Ex GKN dispute has become emblematic of the struggle to break free from the jobs-environment dilemma today, taking it to its most radical conclusions.[3] It is nonetheless self-defeating to ignore today's prominence of a working-class denialism, which assembles the jingoist and patriarchal elements within the working class to the project, promoted by the "Alt Right", of a capitalism liberated from the green mask, as the latter has become a much too cumbersome nuisance. If Bidenomics could be characterised as a "green" plan of capital,[4] Trump's economic policy is the white – supremacist – plan of capital, exiting the Paris Agreement while openly advocating the ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

In the rhetoric of the "ecological transition from above", workers must accept restructurings in the name of a supposed sustainability, merely internalising the profit imperative, even if the latter comes neither with a steady income nor with an actual decline of $CO_2$ emissions. Where workers manage instead to counter this with an alternative vision of productive conversion, and to conquer a space of protagonism to re-design its trajectory, we see the outlines of an "ecological transition from below",[5] in which both working-class interests and sustainability are simultaneously advanced. In such cases, capital gets rid of its "smart" trappings to declare flat-out that its own

2  E.g., Lorenzo Feltrin and Devi Sacchetto, "The work-technology nexus and working-class environmentalism: Workerism versus capitalist noxiousness in Italy's Long 1968", *Theory and society*, 50(5), 2021, 815-835.

3  Francesca Gabbriellini and Paola Imperatore, "An eco-revolution of the working class? What we can learn from the former GKN factory in Italy", *Berlinergazette.de*, 2023.

4  Lorenzo Feltrin, "Il piano verde del capitale: Crisi e direzioni alternative", *Globalproject.info*, 2024.

5  Lorenzo Feltrin and Emanuele Leonardi, "Working-class environmentalism and climate justice: The challenge of convergence today", *ProjectPPPR.org*, 2023

ecological transition was a farce and that certain segments of the working class, destined to become larger and larger, must simply resign themselves to be tossed from one catastrophe to another. In such a conjuncture, we must strengthen the counterpowers of working-class rigidity against the flexibility demanded by the market, weaving connections among the struggles waged by different segments of the working class.

But which social forces can take upon themselves such a daunting task? To search for answers, it is useful to examine the configurations of interest and power within the global working-class composition. On the on hand, the workers who have the strongest interest in limiting the ecological crisis are those most affected by it and who benefit the least from business as usual, like the peasants who have been losing their livelihoods under the blows of droughts and floods. On the other hand, those who have the greatest power to do it are the workers employed in the hard-to-abate polluting industries. Coalition building between these two types of working-class compositions would be needed to generate the broad social movements necessary for working-class rigidity to become a more assertive counterpower. However, sound theory and good intentions are not enough. In fact, when it comes to the will and ability to challenge a whole system, interest and power tend to be inversely proportional. The objective fragmentation of the working class means that opportunities for convergence tend to arise in conjunctures of crisis, when and where the structures separating different working-class segments become temporarily fluid, providing the space for a converging momentum.

A contribution of *operaismo*[6] that remains useful today is the principle according to which different working-class compositions need different organisational forms. There is then no universal formula, ready to be applied to any context. Re-working the Trontian motto 'strategy to the class, tactics to the party',[7] we

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[6]  *Operaismo* is a New Left current that emerged around the struggles of Italy's factory workers in the 1960s and was mainly disseminated through the journals *Quaderni rossi* (1961-66) and *Classe operaia* (1964-67).

[7]   Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, London: Verso, 2019 [1966].

could say 'rigidity to the class, flexibility to the organisation'. As argued by Rodrigo Nunes, the flexibility principle must also be applied to the articulation between horizontal and vertical elements of organisational forms.[8] However, Nunes' most interesting proposition is perhaps that of seeing any organisation as operating in an ecology of organisations; an organisational plurality, inescapable even within the working class itself. Traditional unions are still the instrument most used by the workers directly and stably employed by capital-intensive firms. However, the further one moves towards the precarious pole of the working class, the harder it becomes for the big unions to represent a contractually fragmented and physically dispersed workforce. A multiplicity of organisational forms is thus adopted by different segments of the surplus working class: smaller and more radical unions, social movement organisations, community associations, etc.

Many struggles led by precarious workers are centred in the community, where these working-class segments have more leeway to organise.[9] It is true, as Silvia Federici wrote, that capital prefers 'cooperation at the point of production, separation and atomization at the point of reproduction'.[10] However, in addition to the home, there are collective sites of reproduction such as educational institutes, public squares, mutual aid projects, or cultural and sports centres. These points of reproduction can serve as the infrastructure, as well as the object, of community-centred mobilisations. Think for example of how the defence of Istanbul's legendary Gezi Park ignited the 2013 movement against Erdoğan's authoritarian turn. The community is also the sphere in which workers experience most directly a material interest to counter the ecological crisis, manifested in the needs for breathable air, drinkable water, healthy food, space and time for enjoying

[8]  Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization*, London: Verso, 2021.

[9]  Ana C. Dinerstein, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

[10]  Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland (CA): PM Press, 2012, 146.

contact with non-human nature, etc. However, to maximise their effectiveness, mobilisations for healthy ecosystems must somehow connect to the workplaces. The challenge of building political re-compositions between community and workplace struggles is thus also the challenge for a convergence between different organisational forms. This does not mean fusion or homogenisation. Convergence rather implies collaboration between different organisations from their base, while keeping the specificities that allow them to function effectively for their respective working-class segments.

The GKN Factory Collective's long struggle is precisely about this. It is about experimenting an organising method in which the vertical tension expressed by union representatives affiliated to a national structure is coupled with the plurality – in terms of political histories, geographic positions, strategies and tactics – of the climate justice movement. The international mobilisation gathered around the former automotive factory in Campi Bisenzio exemplifies an ecosystem of different organisational forms that not only co-exist but also coordinate for a common goal, that of a public-owned, worker-managed, socially integrated enterprise. After years of prevalent horizontalism, ambitious in its objectives but probably too unwieldy and dispersive, a collective of metalworkers embraced the struggle for the defence of life and asked those willing to support it to test novel and bold assemblages: with sister organisations to reinforce historical ties, faraway ones to open new possibilities, individuals who after years of retreat recovered the passion for militancy, workers of other industries and many more.

Struggling for a sustainable conversion of the Florentine site, the GKN Factory Collective is entrenching the vision that another way of producing is possible and that workers' knowledge can be a motor of this transformation. For what concerns organising, there are no universal miracle recipes to flaunt – "Don't ask us for the word that squares every corner"[11] they seem to keep repeating – because at the basis of any political process are collective responsibilities and skills. It is nonetheless certain that

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[11]  Eugenio Montale, "Non chiederci la parola", *Ossi di seppia*, Milan: Mondadori, 2024 [1925].

all the management and care structures of the GKN dispute – from the permanent assembly to the liaison stewards,[12] from the Reindustrialisation Group to the cook brigades, up to the artistic direction of the self-funding events – point in the direction of this sought-after convergence between different realities, between hyper-specific claims and demands for a radical transformation of everything – between runaways, neophytes, orphans of mass parties and militant unions, grassroots activists and social centres, the big organisations of yesterday and the tides of today.

We are still far from the time to draw a balance sheet of the "method of convergence" and its impact on the movements and organisations that have accepted its challenge. However, while there are objectives yet to be achieved – one above all, a fully intersectional articulation of the mobilisation – with respect to the climate justice movement in Italy we can speak of a point of no return. Any ambiguity regarding the need to dismantle the employment blackmail and any retreat from the claim "End of the month/end of the world, same fight" are and will be considered reactionary. Likewise, any labour dispute that eludes the ecological question in the redesign of productive assets will no longer have places to hide from the accusation of "monetising the climate crisis".[13]

The call launched by the Ex GKN dispute – which crossed national borders by intercepting spaces for reflection and sharing in many other countries – is not however confined to the sole dimension of the social movements, grassroots organisations and communities that have gathered around the factory. Of no secondary importance, in fact, is the challenge posed to Italy's largest trade union confederation, of which the GKN workers – historically affiliated to the Federation of Metalworkers within the Italian General Confederation of Labour (FIOM-CGIL) –

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[12]  The liaison stewards are factory activists tasked with representing workers from each unit of the plant. They work alongside the union representatives officially recognised by the employee representation system.

[13]  In the Italian labour movement, the "monetisation of noxiousness" was an expression used to criticise the acceptance of "danger money" for particularly hazardous or health-damaging tasks, as opposed to the eradication of noxiousness itself.

embody values and practices that, if recovered and generalised, would bring so much benefit to trade unionism.

The Association of Social Promotion – Workers' Mutual Aid Society (APS-SOMS) Insorgiamo, established shortly after the outbreak of the dispute, highlights the trajectory of mutualism embraced by the organisation. The complexity of APS-SOMS Insorgiamo, founded in the fall of 2022, is evident even from its name. APS, because – given the current legislation on the third sector – this is the organisational form that best suits the activities of the workers' permanent assembly. SOMS, because the historical legacy of the workers' mutual aid societies echoed at every step of the dispute, capturing not only the aspects most closely linked to employment and wage demands, but also those of life beyond work, to be organised and valorised as moments of self-determination, solidarity building, mutual aid, and fun. Finally, Insorgiamo, the watchword of the Florentine antifascist Resistance, adopted since the beginning of the struggle to underline the ideal horizon that the workers consider as foundational. This organisational tool was thus born from the workers' permanent assembly, in synergy with the liaison groups and the entire insurgent community, based on historical practices of the labour movement, on class solidarity, and on the idea that the active contribution of all is indispensable for a territory that wants to live with dignity. Can't we discern, in these mutual aid plots, new forms of enlarged community bargaining, capable of bringing back a vision of workers as full human beings beyond the workplace, reclaiming free time and energy to care for their communities and social needs? Furthermore, isn't the ecological planning developed in recent years a rediscovery and systematic implementation of the demand for "workers' control" – part of the history of the international labour movement – that is not exhausted in participation alone, but in a concrete contribution to redesigning how, what and how much to produce?

Another organisational instance of this dispute is its solidarity network of researchers. Dismantling the vicious circle "publish or perish" to reclaim the public utility of research; bypassing the

self-styled ruling class on the terrain of industrial policy (which has been inconsistent or, worse, oriented towards a conversion to the war economy); bringing jurisprudence to the rank-and-file, outside of the handbook, at the service of social change: these are just some of the challenges that the GKN Factory Collective and the research network around it have undertaken. Let's summarise some of the articulations developed over the course of the dispute to resist, plan, more forward. In the fall of 2021, a Solidarity Research Group was formed, mostly made up of precarious researchers, who contributed to the planning of a possible new sustainable course for the factory. This militant activation of the academic world soon evolved into the Reindustrialisation Group, always operating alongside the Factory Collective and enriched with skills and professionalism from various fields, all geared towards the development of industrial plans for the Florentine site. This regeneration of the meaning of doing research is remarkable, considering its long duration and its capacity to continuously develop strategies and practical implementations. In fact, the reindustrialisation projects have incessantly followed the political evolutions of the dispute, initially outlining a plan that looked to the future of the automotive sector, for the production of components no longer for private cars and individual mobility, but for new fleets of electric or green hydrogen buses for public transport. However, no state authority has taken into consideration the potential of investing in a public hub for sustainable mobility. The workers and the research group thus had to rethink the entire project. This gave rise to a conversion plan, defined as a "forced reindustrialisation", focused on the production and recycling of solar panels and cargo bikes, as an element of continuity with the reflection on sustainable mobility.

The chosen ownership structure for the projected industrial relaunch was that of the cooperative. This was also dictated by the synergy with the solidarity groups, particularly the Italian Network of Recovered Enterprises which, with its social research group, promotes the mapping of such experiences and supports cooperative employment recovery in Italy. The GKN For Future

(GFF) cooperative was created in July 2023 with a capital initially raised thanks to a crowdfunding, and then through a popular shareholding campaign that is still ongoing. Thousands of people and organisations from Tuscany to the United States, from Germany to the Philippines, have secured a solidarity share package. Several hundred shareholders met in October 2024 in the factory for the first international assembly, opened by Greta Thunberg. The infrastructure underlying this process was built through the re-composition, fusion and repurposing of previous working groups, from the comrades involved in social media to those who deal with graphics and videos, from the world of solidarity research to that of art and culture, moving on the same networking terrain. In short, every adequate assembly, rally, concert, demo and trip, every conference dedicated to industrial policy or the ecological transition, was useful to tell the story of the conversion project and to gather support.

The group of lawyers in solidarity was also key. Or rather, the groups. The first spent the initial months of the dispute writing, together with the workers, a bill to contrast delocalisation. Similar to the Reindustrialisation Group, also on the legal front, the trajectories of solidarity work followed the development of the dispute. In the fall of 2021, the priority was trying to ensure that Italy equipped itself with adequate regulations to prevent large multinational companies from prospering and then fleeing without answering to anyone, leaving behind unemployment, noxiousness, and a disintegrated social fabric. In the summer of 2024, when the reflection on the conversion plan "from below" embraced the hypothesis of guaranteeing a future not only to GKN, but also to many other endangered jobs in the Florentine plain, people began reflecting on the establishment of an actual industrial consortium. Going beyond the single plant, reasoning in a systemic perspective, effectively prefiguring the socially integrated public factory as a new productive ecosystem for the well--being of the overall community. No sooner said than done: a legal solidarity group spent the summer of 2024 drafting, together with the Factory Collective, the regional bill for the establishment

of industrial consortia. This is a new industrial policy tool for the benefit of workers in the entire Tuscan productive fabric, whose vulnerabilities are constantly growing.[14] On 23 December 2024, after a process punctuated by accelerations and undertows and a whole night of heated debate, the bill was approved by the Regional Council of Tuscany. There was no time to celebrate this success before the working groups got back to work to monitor the concrete implementation of the consortium, because the law is not enough to bring it into existence. The energies, skills and power resources mobilised by the workers and their supporters will be needed again and again.

Regardless of the final outcome of this struggle, the GKN Factory Collective has made history, changing the terms of the class-ecology question in Italy. Organising the convergence, keeping the dispute as the linchpin of a comprehensive mobilisation for radical change. As a recent document produced by this process states: "Rearmament is the explicit negation of any climate transition objective: the military industry and war are noxious by definition. […] This is why, today, our economic plan is the only viable one. The only plan to preserve life". Almost simple to state, complex and exhausting to pursue. How to arrive at working-class organisational ecologies solid enough to face the war regime is an open issue and, naturally, one not easy to solve. Yet, working in this direction means creating the conditions for a winning alternative against our present of wars and genocides, growing inequalities and ecological devastation.

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[14]  Leonardo Ghezzi and Nicola Sciclone (Eds), *Fattori di vulnerabilità e velocità di crescita: Cosa accadrà all'economia toscana?*, Florence: IRPET, 2024.

Leonor Canadas[1] and Sinan Eden[2]

# Reporting Back from 10 Years of Climate Jobs Campaigning[3]

1.  **Climate jobs campaigns** were active in around ten countries, with different degrees and kinds of success, between 2009 and 2023. (The countries we are aware of included the United Kingdom, South Africa, Norway, Canada, Portugal, France, the state of New York, Mauritius and the Philippines, plus a few countries where there were looser contacts.) The campaign was accompanied by a global network of the national campaigns.

    The object of the Climate Jobs campaigns is defined to be a government program that creates new, public sector jobs in emission-reducing sectors of the economy while giving job priority to those workers whose job posts would be extinct. Many national campaigns produced reports on the impacts of such a government program on employment, carbon dioxide emissions and the economy. Some national campaigns sometimes focused on specific sectors (like buildings or renewable energy).

    As of 2025, we are not aware of any active climate jobs campaign. At the same time, its narrative effects can be seen in the just transition debates (particularly, as opposed market-led policies) and its movement-level impacts can be traced to the positions of labor unions on the climate crisis.

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[2]   Sinan Eden is an activist in Climáximo and co-author of the recently published book »All In: a revolutionary theory to stop climate collapse«

[3]   The article has been originally published at All In: a revolutionary theory to stop climate collapse: https://all-in.now/article/reporting-back-from-10-years-of-climate-jobs-campaigning-leonor-canadas-sinan-eden/

As part of our effort for movement learning, we think it to be good moment to report back, take stock and share our reflections, in order to inform current and future attempts with similar objectives.

## 2. We want to make some of our starting points explicit.

2.1. Sinan first heard about the campaign in the United Kingdom on 2015, and launched the campaign in Portugal in 2016 through his involvement in the grassroots climate justice collective Climáximo. He coordinated the Portuguese campaign for several years, while also very active in the global network.

Leonor joined the campaign in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and remained a core campaigner at the national and international level for several years, organizing international conferences and workshops.

So, we both had a good sense of how the campaigns were evolving. Even so, our more detailed analysis comes from our experience in Portugal. We will try to make explicit the possible extent of our conclusions: some of our observations are context-specific yet others seem generalizable.

2.2. We interpret the climate jobs campaigns as **"class-informed climate politics"**. As such, the campaigns (and our lessons) interact with Matthew T. Huber's book **Climate Change as Class War**. One can say that *All In* aims more for **"climate-informed class politics"**. These are more or less the same thing, but the *focus* of analysis changes. Huber analyzes class positions towards climate collapse from the capitalists' perspective and from the working class perspective. He also emphasizes the dominant role the "professional-managerial class" has played in framing the climate debate and strategy. He then looks at class composition in the US, concludes that 75% is working class whereas the professional-managerial class remains a minority, which therefore puts a strategic ceiling unless the latter assumes a deliberate shift to working class politics.

Huber then suggests that the electricity sector workers should be a strategic target for building a mass movement for climate

justice. Unfortunately, his argument remains *analytical*. He doesn't provide any *empirical* data to argue for the feasibility of his proposal. To sustain such a specific strategic proposition, one would expect interviews with union leadership, surveys with the workers in the sector, focus groups with union delegates, or some official union position papers.

    With this article, we want to give such empirical feedback for future organizers.

2.3. This is our attempt for movement-level learning. Our aim is not to evaluate the campaigns. Our goal is that we *fail* forward.

    We made mistakes. We also tried out some things spotlessly yet they didn't work anyway. Other attempts worked with limited success. We discovered "embedded strategic ceilings" in some of our approaches (successful in mobilizing or building alliances, up to a certain point, yet the process itself generates constraints to go further). Yet other approaches were indeed fully successful.

    Many of what you'll read below will be applicable to and relevant for your context. Our goal is that you avoid repeating our failures and instead can take *new* risks and make *new* mistakes.

    In short, we don't claim analytical rigor, we claim organizer's intuition. Our impressions (even if taken as pure "impressions" rather than "data") are still useful information.

3.    **This is meant to be an easy-read.** We'll now give a brief history of the campaign in Portugal (4.) and the global climate jobs network (5.). You might not need to read any of that, in which case you can jump to 6 where we will list all the strategic arguments in favor of launching a climate jobs campaign. Then we will go over each argument and reflect on their degrees of success, limitations, opportunities, and possible drawbacks. Finally, we will get back to *All In*'s terminology and reflect on the campaign's success as a movement-level intervention.

# History of the Portuguese Climate Jobs Campaign

**4.** The climate jobs campaign in Portugal, *Empregos para o Clima*, was launched in 2015/2016 when the anti-austerity mobilizations were coming to an end and the climate summit in Paris was set to result in an inconsequent agreement. Two left-wing parties (the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party) were to play a crucial role in the upcoming minority government by the Socialist Party. The labor unions, heavily influenced if not fully controlled by the Communist Party), have been on the streets together with the precariat for years. And the climate movement was virtually inexistent, organizing its first ever protests on the street.

4.1. **First steps:** The campaign was launched by the initiative of Climáximo (a recently-formed grassroots climate justice group), Precários Inflexíveis (an association of precarious workers) and later GAIA (an environmental justice group). Over the years, more than 20 organizations endorsed the campaign and varying degrees of involvement in the campaign's activities. These organizations included environmental NGOs (like Quercus and Zero), frontline collectives against new oil and gas projects (like Peniche Livre de Petróleo and Alentejo Literal pelo Ambiente), labor unions (like the teachers' union, call center workers union and public workers union) and grassroots groups (like Fridays for Future), as well as organizations coming from other movements (such as feminism, housing, animal rights and global justice).

The official launch was made on 1 May 2016, at the demonstation of Workers Day, in Lisbon, and included a short introductory booklet that was also used as outreach material.

4.2. **Priorities:** The campaign started by aiming for the more difficult potential allies. Instead of seeking for support from the NGO universe (which would give more endorsements but would also produce a bubble), we went to the CGTP, the main labor union confederation in Portugal, largely dominated by Communist Party cadrés. This was a strategic choice. We wanted to try building these

bridges right from the start, create clean communication lines and establish a direct relationship. Over the course of the campaign, we organized hundreds of events and meetings with labor unions, ranging from public sessions to internal workshops and trainings. Sometimes they were about the campaign itself, sometimes about the climate crisis, and sometimes about specific areas (for instance transport, energy or employment).

4.3. **Maturing:** In 2017, the campaign published its first serious report, titled "100 000 Climate Jobs", already with the endorsement of CGTP as well as active engagement of the teachers' unions SPGL (in Lisbon area) and SPN (in the north). It was also the start of increased international involvement by the Portuguese campaigners, reaching its peak with the *Lisbon Just Transition Gathering* in 2018.

With the rise of the school strikes of Fridays for Future and the actions of Extinction Rebellion, the campaign became central to the climate debate in 2019, providing the main talking points for the activists.

4.4. **Innovation**: In 2019, with the campaign report ready and a mass movement accompanying it, the campaign entered a period of distributed strategies. While the report provided a blueprint for carbon neutrality in 2030, the campaigners realized the need for more short-term measures in order to make the campaign into a mobilization tool. So, the "*10 measures to win in the next 4 years*" were launched. These were the policies that were the essential first steps towards climate jobs which could be implemented separately and immediately. Examples include "one day per week for reskilliing of the workers fossil fuel industry", "creation of a public renewable energy company", "creation of a public electric bus company for intercity travel" and "reduction of the working week to 32 hours". These measures would also allow for partial engagement by some groups who might not agree with the totality of the climate jobs report.

4.5. **Pandemic:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the campaign's mass public investment and public employment argument took the

main stage. With reduced possibilities of mobilization, a new and much more detailed campaign report, "200 000 Climate Jobs", was published in 2021. This report addressed all the relevant sectors into substantial detail, and is used as the policy basis for the climate justice movements until today.

4.6. **Experimentation**: Coming out of the pandemic and reaching a limit to organizational involvement, the campaigners decided in 2022 to open the processes to individuals. A first step was the creation of Workers for Climate network. A second step was the creation of working groups: Sines (an industrial hub in the south of Portugal), public transport and public renewable energy.

Up until this point, the campaign's processes were centralized and semi-open. Organizations would endorse the campaign by simply publishing a text of support on their website and allocating a contact person. There were regular campaign meetings (sometimes as frequent as biweekly), with one annual strategy gathering (as part of the National Gathering for Climate Justice). All of these meetings were open to the members of the endorsing organizations. From 2022 onward, an individual could participate in the campaign's internal processes.

This strategic choice was informed by the following factors: We thought that all the organizations that would agree with the campaign's main statement were already in and that all the key organizations were already aware of the campaign. We also realized that a lot of individual workers were excited with the campaign although they couldn't involve their union yet. We concluded that Joining these activists could activate and empower them.

The three working groups all produced their own strategic priorities, plan of activities, and ladders of engagement. A *case study on just transition in Sines* (English version *here*) was published in 2022 and a *report on public renewable energy* (Empowering the Future) was published in 2023. The corresponding working groups also produced pamphlets, local and thematic events.

4.7. By 2023, Sinan and Leonor were frustrated with the campaign reaching its seventh year without any major victory, and gradually

dropped out. (This was also reflected in the divestment of Climáximo in the campaign's activities.) The campaign then decided to focus on public transport. However, the Portuguese campaign has been inactive since October 2024.

# History of the Global Climate Jobs network

5.      Globally, the climate jobs campaign's first steps can be traced back to the first One Million Climate Jobs pamphlet prepared by the *Campaign Against Climate Change* in 2009 in the United Kingdom, and the simultaneous launch of a *climate jobs campaign in South Africa*, led by The Alternative Information and Development Centre.

5.1. The campaign was initially a *loose network* of activists working at the intersection of labor and climate, with a short pamphlet prepared in 2015. As of 2018 (with the dedication of the Portuguese campaigners) it became a *stable platform* of dialogue, skill-share and collaboration. The Lisbon Just Transition Gathering in 2018 was a major step, as were the *online Global Climate Jobs conference* in 2022 and the *in-person Global Climate Jobs conference* in 2023. The global network is inactive since then.

5.2. Throughout the fifteen years of the network's existence, more national campaigns were launched and individual contacts were established in the labor movement. Many of those national campaigns are also discontinued at the moment.

There was quite some positive feedback loops between the campaign and the climate mobilizations, the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy network, and the international labor movement. Campaigners were regularly invited to international conferences organized by labor union confederations.

# Arguments in favor of Climate Jobs

**6.** Phew, this was a long introduction. Now let's get to business.

We will first start with listing all the opportunities and strengths that we foresaw in the campaign.

Then we will go over them one by one, recount our experience and share our learning.(Afterwards, we will return to the language of *All In*, reframe the campaign as a movement-level intervention, and reformulate our evaluation.)

We produced a series of talking points for the campaign. These could implemented as strategic emphasis in a meeting with new organizations, as arguments in a public debate, or as core message in a media engagement. They were:

1. **solving two crises at once:** Similar to the slogan "end of the world, end of the month; same fight", the campaign would produce a net 200 000 decent public jobs, in a country that went through brutal austerity measures, while cutting the emissions to virtually zero by 2030.

2. **leaving the environmentalist bubble:** Engaging with social issues that engage majorities (unemployment, poverty, labor conditions) would increase the reach of the climate justice fight.

3. **existing popular support:** There is universal support on climate policies in Portugal, and simultaneously employment and the economy have been ranking first in people's policy priorities for years.

4. **against the austerity logic:** Similar to Huber's argument against degrowth (due to it reinforcing the echo chamber of professional class activism) and as opposed to "consuming less", the campaign argued for massive public investment to make things differently. This would meet the people where they are and still produce a desirable vision of future in the short-term.

5. **a grassroots perspective:** In contrast to technocratic governance, the campaign was built bottom-up, by civil society organizations representing the working people. The campaign's success would also come hand in hand with people's power.

6. **fighting "for" something:** While many movements fought against something (fossil fuels, privatizations, austerity measures), a fight in favor of a better world could produce a different kind of motivation and a longer commitment.

7.  **a social plan for transition:** Rather than market-oriented policies that "incentivized" companies to perhaps do something, the campaign focused on the actual task at hand: we need to shut down the fossil fuels and scale up renewables, this is a lot of work to do, so we need workers who would be willing to do those jobs. This approach focused on the social aspects (working conditions, public sector jobs, priority to workers who lose their job posts) rather than financial parameters. This social plan would be able to overcome the drawbacks of the neoliberal "green" policies.

8.  **the National Climate Service analogy:** Opposing the "profitability" logic, the campaign underlined the non-negotiability of a livable planet. The climate jobs are necessary. In that way, the campaign's demand resembles the National Healthcare, a completely consensual system in many countries. This would allow us to overcome the so-called "economic realism" and shift the focus away from saving the companies in favor of saving the people and the planet.

9.  **the analogy to Second World War economic mobilizations:** Comparing the effort (in terms of public investment, resources and labour) necessary for the complete re-structuring of the economy and productive systems for the energy transitions, with the Second World War when social priorities were drastically changed.

10. **addressing the false dilemma between jobs and climate:** Proposing governmental programs and arguing that a socially just energy transition would actually require a lot of new jobs, even after retraining of and giving job priority to workers in the polluting industries.

11. **system change can only be the outcome of class struggle:** Arguing that only a working class-led mass movement could deliver the radical socio-economic transformations necessary to tackle the climate crisis, which implies rejecting market mechanisms and insisting in working class leadership.

These eleven arguments are clearly *not* mutually exclusive, and they all point towards the same direction. However, a careful value-based analysis showed us that some would work better than others in certain contexts.

**7.** Now let's see how the campaign put these arguments into practice. Were they effective? Were they robust? Were they successful? Were there other disabling factors that we hadn't paid attention to? Were there specific contexts in which novel aspects came into sight?

7.1. **Solving two crises at once:** This worked but only as a defensive position.

- Almost no organization whom we reached through the anti-austerity movement got inspired by a climate jobs campaign as their main answer. No political party took the campaign to its logical conclusion of producing decent jobs for hundreds of thousands of people. In short, the campaign did *not* effectively solve two crises at once.

- However, the fact that climate jobs (not as campaign but as public policy) *could* solve two crises at once is a powerful argument. The exact numbers in the campaign report gave us a strong hand against voices opposing climate action. Overall, this argument was useful in shifting active opposition to passive opposition as well as passive opposition into neutral positions, as quite some people and organizers who initially had some reserves against climate action got interested in possible outcomes.

- In concrete, this produced more logos and endorsements to the campaign, but not more engagement or commitment.

7.2. **Leaving the environmentalist bubble:** This was a complete disillusionment.

- We thought the campaign would help us talk about a topic that would engage majorities and thereby take the environmentalist bubble outside of its issue-based, technocratic approach. However, environmentalist groups didn't give the campaign more than their endorsement. This was not because NGOs did not find the campaign as the right tool to reach masses. It was because (and explicitly because) environmentalist groups, dominated by middle-class and upper-middle-class folks, did not consider it strategically relevant to have mass involvement in the movement. The campaign could serve a purpose, but they didn't have that purpose in the first place.

- Since the bubble remained intact, we leaving it meant that we got out of it. Our relative success in reaching out to other groups was not fruitful from a hegemony-building perspective. At some point, the campaign had 25 supporting organizations. It was the most diverse civil society initiative (on any topic) with a reasonable structure, process and activity plans. This didn't translate into convergence because as we the campaigners left the bubble, the environmentalists remained there. So it actually left us isolated from the climate movement.
- One consequence was that the campaign ended up being more left-wing than initially designed. This matters. Moderates are not only moderates, they are also disinterested in uncomfortable alliances.

7.3. **Existing popular support:** This was perhaps the trickiest to evaluate.

- Obviously, "generalized concern about the climate crisis" doesn't automatically translate into "popular support for a mass public investment program". Climate policies are still largely defined by market logic, and energy transition policies are seen through the lens of just transition for corporate profits and redundancies for workers.
- There is however another problem with equating "support" with "action", because they typically come as opposites. In many opinion surveys, "support" for a certain topic is itself framed as support to something that *someone else* is doing. At most, "support" is measured by how much sacrifice a person would make for a policy change. In all these situations, the question is never how mobilizing and mobilizable the topic is.
- When people don't have a personal commitment with a cause, the shift from "something should be done" to "this thing should be done" becomes slippery. We observed quite some de-responsabilization (i.e. delegating responsibility to some other entity) and a lot of frustrating "abstract" discussions around climate jobs.

7.4. **Against the austerity logic:** We failed to pull this off, but in this case we cannot dissociate our incompetence from other factors. So we draw little lessons for future organizers.

- By the time the campaign was launched (in 2016) the financial crisis was over in the sense that the state budget was recovering balance. Austerity policies remained intact, of course. But the austerity discourse became much less present. Therefore, being against austerity lost relevance as a mobilization narrative.

- In 2020, with COVID-19 and with the return of austerity in a "naturalized" form, we tried again. Like elsewhere, the Portuguese government injected money to companies and provided for some relief to working class people. The overarching mainstream narrative equated the pandemic with economic hardship. We tried building a mass movement around the main talking points of the climate jobs campaign. We failed in practice. This might be because of general inaction by social movements at the time, it might be that we made a wrong reading of the social context (expecting suppressed outrage that could be triggered).

- In short, we genuinely don't know if there is something to gain by contrasting the campaign against austerity logic that would not be covered by the solving two crises approach (7.1).

7.5. **A grassroots perspective:** This is a self-contradicting expectation.

- It is the campaign's strength that it engages with the institutional framework, proposing large-scale public policies. It is also why it appeals to large movement structures, like the labor unions or NGOs. A civil society proposal to tackle the climate crisis has social credibility.

- In contrast, these institutional actors are (by definition) inserted in the institutions of the system and therefore a civil society proposal doesn't translate into people's power as a strategic priority.

- Therefore, most of the campaign's organizations found in the campaign strong talking points for lobbying rather than a genuine grassroots perspective.

- We had a few grassroots attempts. One example is when a photovoltaic panel factory in the Alentejo region was closed down and the state didn't intervene. We went there, talked with the workers, didn't find any militancy to insist in the maintenance of the factory (neither in the labor unions nor in the community). Our intervention, sadly, ended up being limited to some press releases and some videos of solidarity.

7.6. **Fighting "for" something:** We have no reason to believe this approach works.

- There has been been a perpetuation, namely by academics and NGOs (to which we have been accomplices to, and to some extent even part of) that we must give people something to "fight for" rather than something to fight against ("because people are sick and tired of listening about what is wrong in the world, and that such a discourse demobilizes people; people become cynical if they are not presented with the alternatives; rather people need to be inspired about the possibility to fight for a better future.").

- The campaign tried to do that by providing a vision and a plan for what addressing the climate crisis actually meant. This approach did not produce results anywhere close of a mass movement. And we haven't seen it work elsewhere, except for electoral campaigns through populist leadership.

- Every time we have seen masses of people taking part in protests and movements, it has been because they were angry or even shocked and outraged (not necessarily about something that happened to them, or that affected them directly). Some of the people joining to mass movements actually have a vision for what they are fighting for; usually movement organizers have their own vision as well. But they don't need an *agreement* between all organizers and all participants about what the solutions and alternatives would be.

- Lessons from other movements, as well as the experience of organizing the Climate Jobs Campaign taught us that mass movements have mostly mobilized people against something (a policy, a government, a regime, a system, etc.) by activating their anger and sense of justice, rather than by offering a clear something to fight for.

7.7. **A social plan for transition:** This is not an entry-level argument but is useful to keep in the background for the newly engaged activists.

• Anchoring the conversation away from words like "transition" and "incentives" and in the direction of "actually cutting emissions" is helpful for keeping the conversation on-topic. We found this particularly useful when talking to new activists and new organizations, as many came up with doubts about what "climate action" would serve for in a neoliberal context.

• It was also empowering to introduce the idea of a "from the bottom and to the left" proposal, when new people got involved in the campaign.

• However, given the reign of "the market" in public discourse, insisting in a "a plan by the people for the people" is not a mobilizing language. In our experience, people who aren't already activated are not converted by a "people's power" language.

7.8. **The National Climate Service analogy:** This analogy is helpful in specific contexts but cannot be a main talking point for tackling the climate crisis.

• Tackling the climate crises demands large scale economic planning and public investment which calls for some kind of public body to coordinate, regulate, ensure and be accountable for the necessary actions.

• However the necessary level of action means systemic changes impacting all sectors of the economy. These will indeed demand changes in *all* the emitting sectors: electricity, all kinds of transport (including aviation), construction, waste management, food, etc.

• So, the analogy seems helpful in arguing for the irrelevance of the costs and revenue from climate action, as it should be addressed as a public key service, comparable to the services of guaranteeing access to healthcare and education for all. However it becomes too complex and confusing of an analogy, when one tries to present it in more detail.

- Hence, we found it not always very useful and "at-hand", and it proved to be an irrelevant argument when addressing labor unions and other forms of sectorially organized working class structures.

7.9. **The analogy to Second World War economic mobilizations:** While helpful as a proof of large scale fast economic transformation, this argument reinforces a view that delegates the task to "politicians".

- Such analogy was helpful in articulating the possibility of a having a coordinated large-scale fast economic plan for the energy transition. It requires leaving a side a key point, which is the one of the economic interests of the capitalist class in both of the examples in the analogy. We saw this work quite well.

- At the same time, the analogy is useless if people to not believe, beforehand, that the climate crisis imposes a much more radical shift in social priorities, than the one which happened during the WWII economic mobilizations.

- It seems that, even if interesting, the analogy produced nothing beyond hope that some policymaker, some government, or some entity, at some point, would act upon an upcoming emergency. It nevertheless failed to produce the right emotions that would motivate action, and to target people's sense of responsibility to act.

7.10 **Addressing the false dilemma between jobs and climate:** This is not the right argument to win if you want to produce militancy.

- We made this argument very clearly and explicitly, as it was intrinsic to the definition of climate jobs. Nevertheless, we know (and workers also know) that under the neoliberal regime, the shutting down of fossil infrastructure and investment on "green" infrastructure will not ensure a just transition for workers. Even when there is job creation under "green investment policies", these jobs are in no way connected to a social plan for a just transition, which means there are no guarantees that the jobs created are allocated to workers who lost their jobs. Guaranteeing this would actually demand social and transformative power from the labor movement and the climate justice movement, which none currently holds.

- It is not possible to get unions or workers to dismiss this jobs vs climate paradigm, because they know that this dilemma is only false under a different socioeconomic model. In the current one, it is a real dilemma.

- So the argument is actually not that there is no jobs vs climate dilemma, but rather that there is an existential dilemma between capitalism and life on this planet, and that there are no jobs on a dead planet.

- Similarly to what we said in 7.1, by making sure that our proposal would not reinforce the dilemma, we managed to get more logos and endorsements for the campaign, but this did not translate into more engagement or commitment.

7.11. **System change can only be the outcome of class struggle:** This presupposes winning the argument on the need for system change, which the campaign on its own cannot achieve.

- This one was more directed at left-oriented organizations. But even in this subset, the argument that the climate crisis requires radical socioeconomic transformations was not a given.

- Not all organizations (including labor unions) who would agree to somehow get involved in and support the campaigns would accept capitalism as the root cause of the climate crisis. Hence, they would not look at climate collapse as a working-class issue. Rather they would be involved mostly due to an understanding that the energy transition brings "challenges" and novelty to the labor market, to which unions must be prepared for.

# Arguments in favor of a Climate Jobs campaign

8. So far, we talked about climate jobs as a strategic proposal (to the general public and to the organizers). Thus, our analysis was detached from the *movement ecosystem* in which the campaign lived. Now let's direct our focus to the movement-level dimension. (This section will interact with the terminology used in *All In*,

but we will not assume that you read the book already or that you remember everything in it.)

There were three ways in which the campaign was a movement-level intervention.

**9.** The first one was to **engage with the institutional capability**, which can be defined as "engaging in systematizing demands and consolidating victories".

9.1. The most important symbolic victory here is that the *Climate Law* (which gives the framework for all subsequent legislation) approved in 2021 specifically says that "the State promotes a just transition to a carbon neutral economy by … creating climate jobs" (Article 69a).

9.2. Having celebrated this symbolic victory, we must report that no political party raised climate jobs as their banner. Although we had the same intentions, we failed to build the same popular and left-populist agenda that the Green New Deal unleashed in several countries.

9.3. On the labor union side, we had some hope in engaging in sector-specific union activity. However, in Portugal the entire energy sector (production, transmission and distribution) is fully privatized. This means that a demand for public sector jobs presupposes nationalizations of some sort, which sounded too far-fetched even for the most combative unions. This handicap is less valid for the transport sector, which is still dominated by public companies. In the case of transport, we had minor but significant moments of solidarity in anti-privatization campaigns.

In general, we failed to shift the "just transition" discussion within the unions from a defensive one (transition only if "just") into a propositional one (just transition from the bottom to the left).

9.4. Leonor recently wrote about the *institutional capability of the European climate justice movement.* Here we start with the campaign and look at the movement. In her article, she starts with the movement and situates the campaign in it.

**10.** The second one was to **aim at some narrative capability**, which is the movement's skills on influencing the public narrative.

10.1. We had one substantial success. The climate justice movement as a whole, including during its peak in the Global Climate Strike of September 2019, raised climate jobs as its main banner. This contributed significantly to the politicization of the young climate activists. The campaign serving as a simple tool to engage in policy discussions, the movement was capable of highlighting (in concrete and empirical ways) how the governments were failing to tackle the climate crisis.

10.2. Overall, the market-oriented takeover of the green jobs and just transition was too powerful for the campaign to counter. In the public debate, Climate Jobs could not provide a narrative capability as strong as Green New Deals did.

10.3. Even within the labor movement, over the course of eight years, we did not manage to create a substantial perceived differentiation between green jobs and climate jobs.

**11.** The third one was to engage with a small yet powerful percentage of the working class – **organized labor from carbon intensive sectors**. These are the workers that could directly engage into economical and political struggle for a just transition, and withdraw their labor from these sectors.

11.1. Similar to in other countries, the unions who engaged the most in the campaign were those coming from sectors that are not directly affected from a fossil fuel phase-out. In Portugal, we had the support of the teachers' union, public servants union and the call center workers union. Their engagement was therefore secondary and they wouldn't turn the campaign into a core demand within their agenda.

11.2. We had also hoped to open up debates on how a workers-led transition could look like, what demands this could entail, and what kind of workplace disputes could be generated through this process. These hopes did not materialize as they required a transformative political approach which the unions have lost over the decades.

11.3. Nevertheless, CGTP's support to the campaign played a significant role in delaying a negative public stance by the unions to climate action in general. The first outright anti-climate statement came as late as 2022 from Fiequimetal, the federation comprising workers in energy and heavy industry.

# Lessons and Observations

**12.** We reached this point, but we are still not being very *empirical*. The paragraphs 6 and 7 were applicable to almost any modern society (with some adjustments). The paragraphs 8, 9, 10 and 11 treat "the movement" as an abstraction rather than the actual living beings and actually existing organizations that we interacted with, and could therefore apply to diverse contexts. In both of the previous sections, we started *analytically* and provided *supporting empirical evidence*. However, we had promised (in 2.) to do the opposite: put the empirical evidence at the center.

So let's shift our angle for one last time. Let's start with our observations as campaigners, and then see how these observations relate to the abstract categories above.

12.1. If you didn't win the climate emergency argument, then you won't win the ambition discussion. Climate emergency cannot be sidelined. It cannot be downgraded to climate change or climate policy.

The campaign relied on institutional actors taking up climate jobs as their banner to move into an offensive position. It therefore also relied on some kind of internal reflection within those same movement actors (NGOs, labor unions, political parties alike) on our generalized ambition deficit and how it relates to our theories of change and grand strategies.

Stepping up in such a way requires the recognition of the state of emergency in which we currently are. Without this realization, the campaign gets reduced to a mere policy research group.

12.2. We must understand that there is no just transition for the unions themselves.

An employee of a union in a big, well-unionized refinery is experienced in the area and has gained the trust of the workers. You are typically talking to this employee as part of your alliance building process.

However, this employee knows quite well that if that refinery is closed down, even if all workers are safely transferred to climate jobs, the union power will be diminished. Firstly, renewable energy typically disperses workers and they would have to unionize from scratch. Secondly, in many cases the union itself is different (for instance if a refinery is in chemical industry but the new jobs are in the electricity sector). Thirdly, there is no "retraining" program for the specific union employee so they might actually become redundant unless they can catch up with a very step learning curve.

These are non-theoretical, non-abstract, actual concerns that unions and unionists have, for which we have no solutions.

12.3. You must find the sweet spot between respecting the union structure and engaging with the rank and file.

We couldn't find it.

We were mostly cordial to the union structure and didn't go directly to workers. This is also because we were aware of the loyalty of the workers to their unions, so we understood that jumping over the union would be taken as hostile attitude. However, this meant that unless we convinced a specific and small amount of union activists, we couldn't make progress.

In the rare cases that we talked to the workers without mediation, it was still the case that they needed to take action through the union processes so we lost contact.

12.4. Climate jobs was (and is) an essential policy tool for the climate justice movement.

The campaign reports informed the Global Climate Strike, the later actions by Fridays for Future, the action camps of Climáximo as well as other campaigns (fossil gas, aviation, private jets, etc.). These mobilizations therefore had a good policy background (the spokespersons were credible and could sustain sophisticated policy discussions) and had a good radicalization pipeline (well

beyond the "there is no planet B", the activists quickly understood the socioeconomic stakes at hand).

12.5. No one from the labor movement stepped up.

Beyond a few individual sympathizers, we didn't find any organization in the labor movement to step up, take the climate crisis seriously in its agenda, and fight for it.

This is consistent with the strategic conformism within historical unions. However, one could expect that newly emerging unions could take a different, more combative stance. This didn't come true.

# What we make out of all this

**13.** We said in the beginning of this article that we were writing it because it was a good moment to take stock. There is one more reason: We believe that many of these lessons can be immediately transferred to some of the current experimentations in the climate justice movement.

We have been seeing two emerging strands within the climate justice movement: (1) those who recognize the (latent/potential) disruptive power of the unions. (2) those who focus on engaging masses in the movement. The starting premises for both are spot on: we need mass engagement in the movement and some of us have to focus on chains of value production.

Experiments in this area include the housing/tenants organizing around energy poverty and the public transport campaigns (we are not including Huber's proposal on the electricity workers because we are not aware of a concrete working group on it).

However, we would like to highlight that we cannot afford to repeat previous mistakes because we don't have time for them. We identify three crucial weaknesses in both of these strands.

13.1. Firstly, they seem to depart from wishful thinking and stick to this attitude (in some cases, for years). They seem to solely rely on words like "patience", "relationship-building" and "community organizing", and use these words to avoid setting up measurable goals and monitoring them with a critical eye.

13.2. Secondly, we live in times of emergency. This means that we cannot repeat the community organizing playbooks written in the 1970s. We must innovate substantially in order to fit those practices with the climate deadlines while not creating illusions of shortcuts. (Otherwise, we must drastically reduce the scope of our ambitions and claim that we are just doing outreach / awareness raising without any ambition to organize and mobilize.) For instance, we must have checks and balances mechanisms within our campaigns that are much more frequent than usual.

13.3. Thirdly, we cannot lie to people. If we actually believe that in any country of the Global North there shall be zero emissions by 2030, then we cannot hide this information for long. We would simply be avoiding the divisive line, the main problem to solve. Therefore, diverting the conversation away is not the way to have substantial convergence nor would we be able to build trust.

Many activists are reading North American literature on community organizing but that literature in general avoids systemic change as an option. This can be compensated to some extent by the critical pedagogy strand developed by Paulo Freire, where we can also learn about how we can remain assertive of our political anchors.

**14.** With this long report, we wish to contribute to movement learning. It is our hope that comrades who launch similar organizations or campaigns get to fail forwards and make new mistakes, instead of repeating ours.

# PART II

Zoi Christina Siamanta[1]

# Conceptualizing Alternatives to Contemporary Renewable Energy Development: Community Renewable Energy Ecologies (CREE)[2]

**Abstract:** Privately-owned, state-owned and public-private renewable energy (RE) projects are increasingly criticized by social scientists. They can involve dispossessions, management and financial inequalities, and environmental problems. Research also indicates that Community Renewable Energy (CRE) projects are not without problems and dangers. In this article, I go beyond critique of renewable energy projects, without abandoning them, to develop an alternative affirmative framework for RE production in the face of mounting climate and ecological crises. I employ a productive approach to rethink RE development, that combines the diverse and community economies perspective developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham with political ecology research on alternative economies. Building on this approach and RE and CRE literature, I develop the notion of Community Renewable Energy Ecologies (CREE). CREE signify community economies involved in small-scale RE prosumption (production and consumption), or medium-scale RE prosumption and sale of energy. They adopt non- and alternative capitalist relations of ownership, production, exchange and circulation.

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CREE are engaged in collective ethico-political decision-making, and an oikopolitics embodying care for and affective relations with humans and more-than-humans. Such decision-making and oikopolitics are directed towards more 'thriving' and egalitarian socio-ecological futures. I identify particular ethico-political orientations for CREE and provide specific considerations for their constitutive elements (e.g. ownership, finance, labor, infrastructure). CREE reflect one of multiple possibilities for alternative sustainabilities in a pluriversal world.

**Keywords:** Renewable energy, capitalism, affect, community economies, climate change, commoning

# Introduction

Renewable Energy (RE) development under utility-scale and smaller state-owned, privately-owned or public-private projects is increasingly criticized by social scientists –including political ecologists– given the adverse dynamics, dispossessions and environmental problems observed in different cases (e.g. Dunlap 2019; Rignall 2016). Meanwhile, some academics argue that Community Renewable Energy (CRE) is a (possible) means for democratizing the energy transition, that does or can provide numerous benefits to local communities contributing to socio-ecological sustainability. Others are more cautious towards CRE, revealing weaknesses in its celebratory accounts (e.g. Berka and Creamer 2018; van Veelen 2018). CRE involves problems and risks too (e.g. Johnson and Hall 2014; Schreuer 2016). In this article, I transgress a critique of community and non-community RE to conceptualize one of several possible pathways for human and more-than-human prosperity in the face of mounting capitalogenic environmental crises, rethinking renewable energy development for alternative sustainabilities. For this purpose, I first examine the benefits, problems and dangers of CRE. Then, I discuss the diverse and community economies approach developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham, and contributions bridging poli-

tical ecology with the 'diverse economies' perspective. Building from this, I develop an alternative affirmative framework for RE development under the notion of Community Renewable Energy Ecologies (CREE). CREE signify community economies engaged in small-scale energy 'prosumption' (production and consumption), or medium-scale renewable energy prosumption and sale, according to alternative modes of ownership, production, exchange and circulation. CREE, as envisioned here, are involved in collective ethico- political decision-making embodying care for and affective relations with humans and more-than-humans. They are engaged in an oikopolitics directed towards more 'vivacious' and egalitarian ways of becoming, together with humans and others. I identify particular ethico-political orientations for CREE and provide reflections for their constitutive elements to consider (e.g. concerning ownership, finance, labor, infrastructure, and technology). Reframing (C)RE development under this notion and framework widens the possibilities for social experimentation with more equitable and 'thriving' socio-ecological futures beyond capitalism.

## CRE: benefits, problems and risks

Following Walker and Devine-Wright (2008), Community Renewable Energy projects are typically understood as energy or heat generation projects using renewable energy technologies, where communities have a high degree of ownership and control over energy. Much less widespread than commercial renewable energy projects, thousands of CRE projects exist across the world. They are diverse in their organization and ownership, including trusts and cooperatives. They have different motivations behind them, are of different scales, and involve various actors including nongovernmental organizations and the state. CRE literature explores, inter alia, the benefits and problems of projects (e.g. Berka and Creamer 2018; van der Waal 2020), the factors influencing their outcomes (e.g. Guerreiro and Botetzagias 2018; Madriz-Vargas et al. 2018) and their transformative capacity. Trans-

formative capacity is examined through the viewpoints of energy democracy, degrowth, and social justice (e.g. Burke and Stephens 2018; Rommel et al. 2018; van Veelen 2018). The net assessment is that CRE projects provide numerous benefits. These include: greater participation in energy decisions and local autonomy; community or individual empowerment; local socio-economic development; enhancing distributional justice; development of skills and knowledge; and encouraging environmental-friendly behaviors and attitudes (e.g. Hicks and Ison 2011; Walker and Devine-Wright 2008). However, robust evidence for the actual benefits and implications created in practice is thin (Berka and Creamer 2018; Creamer et al. 2018; van der Waal 2020; van Veelen 2018). Most research has been conducted in the Global North, centring on the UK, Denmark, Germany, the USA and Australia. Some uncritical celebratory assertions have been made about the (expected) socio-ecological benefits of CRE.

The signifier 'community' does not necessary entail socially just or progressive outcomes. Indeed, CRE projects are highly variegated, influenced by numerous internal and external factors and not without adverse dynamics and dangers. In the following sub-sections, I examine the purported benefits (e.g. empowerment, local economic development, skills/knowledge development) against actual benefits, problems and risks. I also discuss further benefits, risks and parameters not usually or adequately addressed by CRE literature (e.g. cultural benefits, interrelationships with resource extraction). The sub-sections summarize the key socio-ecological implications and aspects of CRE as suggested by the literature.

## Participation, empowerment and equality

Community renewable energy projects facilitate local participation in forming energy futures, enhancing procedural justice, and can also empower local communities (e.g. MacArthur and Matthewman 2018) and women (Madriz-Vargas et al. 2018). They offer a pathway for greater local autonomy and self-determination

compared especially to utility-scale renewable energy provision. For example, MacArthur and Matthewman (2018) discuss energy production and efficiency initiatives undertaken by and partnered with Maori Iwi in New Zealand, including large (co)owned geothermal plants and smaller RE microgeneration projects (e.g. photovoltaics). Although not devoid of tensions and struggles, they offer Iwi a pathway for greater control over their own socioeconomic development and, thus, for self-determination (ibid).

A key equity concern for CRE is that wealthier and knowledgeable socioeconomic groups can dominate community energy programs, reflecting existing socioeconomic inequalities (e.g. Creamer et al. 2018; Johnson and Hall 2014; Schreuer 2016). For instance, in Germany, CRE initiatives tend to be dominated by men and individuals who are more knowledgeable about how to participate in civil society organizations (Radtke 2014). Participants tend to be well-educated with good incomes (monthly gross incomes of US$3,829 [€3,500] and above, in Radtke's study). Research on local-scale development projects involving renewable energy in the Global South indicates gender inequalities, in part because gender is ignored in program development (Ahlborg 2017; Winther et al. 2018). Some studies mention the inability of poor individuals to obtain electricity from such community projects and similar ones (e.g. Ahlborg 2017; Palit et al. 2013).

Hostile policy frameworks can undermine empowerment. For instance, van der Waal (2020) notes that a small community wind project on a Scottish island remains vulnerable to policy change around government subsidy mechanisms leading to reduced revenues, and decisions not to extend the transmission grid. Mey and Diesendorf (2018) explore the evolution of the CRE field in Denmark, focusing on community wind power. They highlight that with a strong dependency on state facilitation and an institutional preference for advancing wind technology to reduce emissions, the field has become vulnerable and the social principles of CRE have suffered. The Danish government provided financial and regulatory support for incentivizing CRE initiatives, facilitating the institutionalization of the field's key

principles (ibid). In Austria, co-owned and co-operated wind and solar plants have progressively been incorporated into established structures, and adapted to the prevailing sociotechnical regime and economy. This is because they have been scaled up, and taken up by utility companies. Their initial aims have drifted in the process (Schreuer 2016); participation has weakened, and utilities decide on plant management and operation.

Ahlborg (2017) examines a mini-hydropower electrification project in a poor village in Tanzania, funded by national and international donors and implemented and initially owned by an international development organization.[3] She describes a tension between empowerment and dominance because of the project, reflecting growing social inequality. However, some social hierarchies were destabilized within the community, with some individuals experiencing greater social mobility. For example, the NGO prevented local leaders from holding influential positions in the utility and, thus, ordinary villagers gained control over the technical system and service delivery limiting the influence of local elites. While some positive outcomes were observed (e.g. opening of political 'spaces' for shifting power relations within the community), the project was formed by a development logic originating "at higher levels where donors control the financial and time frames of working processes, and project objectives, strategy and system design are based on norms of established development practice and expert knowledge of designing electric power systems" (p. 133). Palit et al. (2013) explore India's Village Energy Security Programme, where village energy committees (VECs) own and run decentralized village programs involving renewable bioenergy with assistance from external institutions. They mention, amongst other things, inadequate empowerment of, and training of these committees in many cases. Hinshelwood (2001) shows how external organizations that offered to support a community wind project in the UK (including partial funding) tried to impose their agendas and modify the

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[3]  This NGO later transferred ownership to the local utility once it was established.

project's initial ideas and plan, threatening local control of it. Different types of organizations are involved in CRE and capacity-building efforts (Hicks and Ison 2011; Palit et al. 2013).

To summarize, CRE projects can lose their transformative capacity over time as others step in, adapting to prevailing economic models and energy systems. CRE projects frequently have to adapt to policy frameworks and the market, and more powerful actors can seize control. Individuals can become marginalized and even vulnerable. If unequal power relations within, and in relation to, communities (e.g. regarding decision-making, income inequality) are not challenged then they can become entrenched in projects, (re)producing or exacerbating existing inequalities.

## Local socioeconomic development

CRE projects can generate local socioeconomic benefits, contributing to locally-added economic value, or even to regional economies through revenues, job creation and income diversification (e.g. Okkonen and Lehtonen 2016; Sperling 2017; see Berka and Creamer 2018). While job creation, income generation and revenue diversification from project development and operation are noteworthy benefits, the primary factor determining socioeconomic regeneration is where long-term project revenues are allocated (Berka and Creamer 2018). For example, the most substantial changes residents saw from a 900kW community wind project in a Scottish island were either direct or indirect effects of project revenues (van der Waal 2020). Revenues were mainly used to finance some much-desired additional transport services for the island, with many beneficial flow-on effects (ibid). In Indonesia, earnings from two micro or small hydro cooperatives[4] were invested in new income-generating or productive activities by villagers, such as a small enterprise manufacturing bags (Guerreiro and Botetzagias 2018). Berka and Creamer (2018) find that investing project revenues in the local community and on socioeconomic regeneration is one of the most 'substantial'

[4]    One coop is hybrid, involving wind and solar as well.

local impacts of CRE. Therefore, they contend that "collective funding pools and negotiation processes around their distribution [revenues] towards private versus public goods play a crucial role in determining transformative local impacts of CRE" (p. 3400). Lastly, procuring materials and labor and sourcing capital locally also allow projects to contribute to local socioeconomic regeneration. Local procurement, however, depends on the existence of local supply of labor and services and materials, as well as on scale – for example, smaller projects have been found to source locally more than larger ones (ibid). Entwistle et al. (2014) demonstrate that the cooperative share model using local capital is a better option for socioeconomic regeneration, reducing the overall cost of borrowing, directly providing income for members, and increasing net earnings and total local GDP impacts.

However, focusing on 'local' socioeconomic development risks assuming a homogeneity within local communities, downplaying inequalities within them and neglecting relevant procedural and distributive justice considerations. It also neglects the disadvantaged communities implicated in unequal power relations and which have limited financial, social and personal resources to pursue CRE (echoing Catney et al. 2014 and Mohan and Stokke 2000). This means risking the creation of new regional or sub-regional inequalities when more advantaged regions and communities engaging in CRE capture the most value from surrounding disadvantaged ones (e.g. through subsidization) (Johnson and Hall 2014).

Energy transition is a geographical process with geographies of connection, dependency and control (Bridge et al. 2013). This means that energy transition in one place is influenced by more than national politics and local contexts: the relationships between countries, the wider political economy of states, transnational firms, international agreements and so on (ibid; see Power et al. 2016 for Mozambique and South Africa). In other words, energy transition governance involves complex relations between multiple actors operating across spaces (Power et al. 2016). It also involves geographical connections and interactions betwe-

en places and new patterns of socio-spatial activity (Bridge et al. 2013). Energy transitions are uneven socio-spatial processes (Calvert 2016) with uneven social consequences for people and places (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). Socioeconomic benefits from CRE for (some in) one place might entail injustices for (others in) other places. CRE localism, therefore, risks seeing the 'local' as isolated from other scales, places, wider interrelations, broader economic and political structures and associated impacts in other places (see also Catney et al. 2014). It neglects the production of geographical differences for economic growth and development, as well as the 'new geographies of winners and losers' and 'new patterns of uneven development' created (echoing Bridge et al. 2013).

## Capacity building

Active participation in CRE can lead to new knowledge and skills emerging on numerous issues, such as project management and community engagement, and can 'harness' pre-existing untapped knowledge, skills and capacities (e.g. Martiskainen 2017; Walker et al. 2010). Capacity building requires some relevant pre-existing knowledge and skills (e.g. technical, legal). Without them, project development can be held back, even where CRE is popular (Berka and Creamer 2018). Moreover, usually, project implementation rests on a limited number of individuals leading projects that have specific knowledge, skills and competencies and new learning may predominantly reflect these people. Meanwhile, limited participation by lower-income and less educated individuals or groups limit possibilities for capacity building.

Capacity building directly relates to 'social capital' formulation. Social capital reflects "the intrinsic capacity within which individuals and their social relationships can provide the means for community action capable of achieving shared objectives" (Peters et al. 2010: 7601, quoted in Parkhill et al. 2015: 62). It involves inclusion in, and creation of, local social ties and networks embedded in trust and conceptualizations of a shared identity, shared visions and a common goal. Strong local social networks

and trust are a prerequisite and a potential outcome of CRE (e.g. Parkhill et al. 2015; Radtke 2014; Walker et al. 2010). Yet, CRE can adversely affect social capital by dividing communities and eroding social cohesion (e.g. Bere et al. 2015; Walker et al. 2010). Berka and Creamer (2018: 3408) find that "the obtrusiveness of technology, the unequitable distribution of costs and benefits and the degree of broad and deep engagement in the project process" determine positive versus adverse impacts on social capital. Moreover, Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) argue that the social capital in CRE initiatives is formed by the community's cultural, organizational, infrastructural and personal capacity.[5] They examine a Native American industrial-scale, community owned renewable energy initiative in the Northern Greater Plains. They demonstrate that even a predominantly disempowered community can alter its own overall capacity for empowerment and change by creatively drawing on its existing capacities.

Intermediaries play a positive role in capacity building (e.g. Guerreiro and Botetzagias 2018; Ruggiero et al. 2014). For example, in the aforementioned Indonesian case, Guerreiro and Botetzagias (2018) emphasize the positive role an intermediary organization played most notably in ensuring that the cooperatives would be financially sustained without external assistance. This was achieved by building on and strengthening existing community capacity to generate income. This ensured villagers would have the economic means to buy RE from the cooperatives. They argue that in a developing country, and especially under a hostile policy environment for CRE, intermediaries as meso-level actors are "a make-or-break pre-condition" for successfully implementing projects, namely for capacity building. Martiskainen (2017) finds that intermediaries pass on new knowledge to other CRE groups and gain knowledge and skills themselves.

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5    Cultural capacity is the legitimacy of sustainability objectives in view of the community's history and values, while organizational capacity is "the values of the organisations active in a community and resulting support available for community action" (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010: 7561). Infrastructural capacity is "the provision of facilities for sustainable living/initiatives by government, business and community groups", while personal capacity the resources for community sustainability members have, such as knowledge and skills (p. 7561).

## Ecocultural sustainability

Aside from avoiding emissions at the points of energy and heat generation, CRE does not necessarily entail progressive ecological outcomes. Research indicates mixed success with better climate change awareness and energy consumption practices amongst CRE participants: in some cases no change was observed, while in others positive changes (for core members) were noted. For instance, six CRE projects in England and Wales did not affect participants' awareness of climate change, but rather were firmly grounded in local economic motives (e.g. income for local farmers, village hall refurbishment) (Walker et al. 2010). Rommel et al. (2018: 1751) argue that CRE projects in Germany are dominated by "technophile eco modernists", with only few members being critical of technology and excessive energy consumption. They find "little evidence of a general change in attitudes towards technology, consumption, or equity" emanating from CRE initiatives, most of which rely on the market economy and are in danger of being 'consumed' by the dominant capitalist politico-economic system (p. 1746).

Rogers et al. (2012) explore a community biomass heating project in England, initially not motivated by environmental concerns or climate change. These concerns were later picked up by the project's directors. They find shifting views on energy use and willingness to pursue or engage in other RE projects by project directors as a 'spill over effect.' They also find that individuals involved in, or in contact with, the project became familiarized with this technology, influencing uptake decisions. However, the project's potential to alter residents' energy practices towards more sustainable lifestyles "may be relatively weak", probably due to the strong focus on local socioeconomic objectives (p. 245). In a survey including 25 individuals from two community hydropower projects in Wales, admittedly subject to self-selection bias, 67% argued they gained greater awareness of climate change, 65% argued they reduced their energy consumption and 48% claimed they installed new energy efficiency measures (Bere et al. 2015). In one project, 26 participating households reduced their energy use by 13.4% over a two-week period, but this occurred after

energy reduction work using smart meters and energy saving advice was provided by the relevant Trust and government.

Beyond other contextual factors, the key reasons for varied outcomes are initial or post-hoc motivations, as well as underlying conceptualizations of technology and conviction (or lack of) to broader change. When motivations exclude concerns about climate change and inducing broader change in society, and rest solely on economic and social benefits for individuals and local communities, then CRE is not likely to have progressive ecological outcomes, such as less consumptive lifestyles (see also Berka and Creamer 2018). Also, as the German case suggests, when technology is perceived as the 'savior' from climate change, then too CRE is not likely to generate progressive ecological outcomes (Rommel et al. 2018). In these cases, CRE could even produce 'rebound' effects, such as increased energy-intensive behavior. Moreover, Berka and Creamer (2018: 3414) find that "where CRE was driven by (financial and/or environmental) objectives that do not extend beyond renewable energy projects, it led to business models designed primarily to generate returns for membership-based investors." They conclude that self-consumption projects involving high levels of active user engagement are more likely to generate positive impacts on environmental behavior (ibid). Projects with explicit environmental mission statements that use revenues to fund, or complement, community-wide action for nourishing lifestyle changes because of climate change are also more likely to have positive impacts on environmental behavior (Berka and Creamer 2018).

Lastly, how (far) CRE contributes to cultural sustainability is under-researched. In a noteworthy case, however, four community-owned wind projects in Wales and Scotland contributed most notably to language retention and revitalization (of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic) (Haf and Parkill 2017). Project revenues were used to finance, inter alia, cultural activities, such as local language courses, traditional music events and community services. Also, the aforementioned Maori case suggests that CRE can counter the overtaking of Indigenous groups by the current neocolonial order and assert their unique ontologies in energy transitions.

## From local to global considerations

Various forms of corporate, non-community RE development have been found to involve top-down land grabs and dispossessions (e.g. Baka 2017; Brannstrom et al. 2017; Dunlap 2019; Rignall 2016; Siamanta 2019), sometimes including extra-legal practices and deception (e.g. Siamanta and Dunlap 2019). Researchers have found notable impacts on local livelihoods (e.g. direct loss, denial of access to land and resources previously used) and the further marginalization, or impoverishment, of already disenfranchised groups and communities (e.g. indigenous populations, ethnic minorities, fishermen) (e.g. Brannstrom et al. 2017; Dunlap 2019; Goraeyb et al. 2018; Lawrence 2014; Rignall 2016; Yenetti et al. 2016). High intensity, and in some cases violent conflicts between companies or the state and local communities, and within communities have been observed (e.g. Brannstrom et al. 2017; Dunlap 2019). Rural gentrification (Dunlap 2019), financial resources grabbing (Siamanta 2017, 2019) and adverse impacts on culture (e.g. Dunlap 2019) are also noted. The latter emanate from altering and/or denying long-established sociocultural practices and human-more than-human relations.

Some scientists argue that a major shift to centralized RE development facilitates capitalism's continued reproduction and expansion (McCarthy 2015; Siamanta and Dunlap 2019). Moreover, some projects explicitly support industrial and high emissions practices elsewhere (e.g. Dunlap 2019), while those involving carbon offsetting and trading indirectly support higher release of greenhouse gasses.[6] Local economic benefits from a commercial project are often deficient (e.g. job creation, community payments, development projects) and less than for true CRE projects (Berka and Creamer 2018). These benefits can be tokenistic, insufficient and problematic (e.g. Lawrence 2014; Rignall 2016). These adverse dynamics and outcomes can be at least minimized through CRE, while it can provide some actual local benefits as discussed above. However, 'avoiding' poor outcomes depends and the extent to which this is even possible depends on the specific project configuration

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[6] On carbon markets, see for example Bachram (2004).

and power relations involved. While environmental degradation at the points of utility-scale RE generation can also be avoided by small CRE projects, for example through the considerate siting of solar panel arrays, not all projects can be socially and environmentally transformative. In general, the literature suggests CRE is closer to socially just renewable energy development for climate change mitigation than non-community, large scale or commercial RE.

There are several crucial issues to consider here. CRE may serve as a 'bridge' between 'roll-back' neoliberalism, where local communities are expected to mitigate climate change through community actions, and 'roll-out' neoliberalism, where they undertake energy projects under neoliberal terms (following (Peck and Tickell 2002; Taylor Aiken et al. 2017). The latter includes the promotion of 'personal responsibility' and 'self-care', as well as the formation of 'self-sufficient', 'self-governing', 'rational economic' and 'entrepreneurial' individuals and communities. Castree (2010) identifies these approaches as a principal characteristic of the neoliberalization project. Subject formation in line with neoliberal environmental governance can reach as far as community renewable energy projects, but also drive individual production of renewable energy (Siamanta 2017).

Moreover, CRE and especially projects feeding energy into state or private utility electricity networks are not disconnected from the broader political economy, commodification, neoliberalization processes, and the wider functioning of the capitalist system. There can be the privatization of electricity networks and energy companies, the deregulation of environmental standards for RE investments, and 'partnerships' formed between community and private actors. Further, paraphrasing Burke and Stephens (2018: 85), RE technologies are embedded within a wider industrial system of fossil fuel and natural resource extraction that supports their manufacturing and that generates huge inequalities. For instance, Sovacool et al. (2020) find that cobalt (used in wind turbines) mining in Katanga Province, DR Congo and e-waste handling in Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana reinforce ethnic and gender inequalities, lowering environmental health through toxic pollution and both depend heavily on

child labor, with some children worked to death and drowned.[7] Renewable and conventional energy production currently serves the dominant growth-oriented development model and its supporting culture, although sometimes unknowingly. CRE may be intensifying existing patterns of human exploitation and environmental degradation or destruction regarding, amongst others: raw material extraction for technology development; technology manufacturing; building infrastructure; e-waste handling; and broader industrial production. It also risks replicating the dominant logics shaping and narratives accompanying natural resource extraction and commodification of energy and more--than-human nature. CRE, thus, can reinforce neoliberal environmental governance and the broader ideational, discursive and material workings of the capitalist industrial system.

Any CRE project that does not place these issues at its center (e.g. industrial development, increasing energy consumption, exploitive relations and injustices), or that does not seek to, at least partially, address them, cannot be considered as producing 'Renewable' Energy, as a sustainable and equitable response to climate change. How can we begin to address these issues under the current model of 'infinite growth' and the growing dominance of 'green capitalism' that equates 'development' with capitalist expansion, nourishing market-based relationships? How could CRE contribute to alternative sustainabilities? Before dealing with these questions, I first discuss affirmative world-making approaches and research that can aid in sketching a different approach for CRE.

## Diverse economies, community economies and more-than-critical political ecology

Gibson-Graham (2006, 2011) challenge the traditional definitions of 'the economy' and dominant understandings of capitalism as a monolithic system. They re-conceptualize the economy as diverse, namely as:

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7    Both cases concern RE technology: cobalt used in wind turbines, and turbine blade and solar panel waste.

> …a landscape of radical heterogeneity populated by an array of capitalist and noncapitalist enterprises, market, non-market and alternative market transactions, paid, unpaid and alternatively compensated labor, and various forms of finance and property (Gibson-Graham 2011: 2).

They specifically distinguish between mainstream capitalist, alternative-capitalist and non-capitalist forms of these five aforementioned interrelated dynamics (labor, enterprise, transactions, property and finance) (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2011). Figure 1 depicts the landscape of 'the diverse economy.' Gibson-Graham (2006, 2011) argue that capitalist practices and relations are only 'the tip of the iceberg', with a whole range of numerous hidden economies lying below the water's surface.[8] However, diverse non-capitalist and alternative-capitalist economic practices and relations are mostly unrecognized and 'unvalued.' They have become non-credible alternatives, receding in the background of mainstream economic thinking: they are invisible due to discursive erasure by capitalocentric perceptions and approaches (Gibson Graham 2006, 2008, 2011).[9] Moreover, "economic dynamics are overdetermined" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 72) and, thus, each aspect of the diverse economy in Figure 1 – social relations, institutions and subjectivities are formed through the intimate interrelationship between, and the effects of, all elements together and not because of one single determinant factor or inescapable structuring logic (Burke and Shear 2014a). Therefore, "the relationship between activities in places cannot be predicted but is open to politics and other contingencies" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 72). And, "relationships, practices and initiatives all become sites of possibility", while "capitalist sites and processes become open to transformation and engagement" (Burke and Shear 2014a: 132). Yet, alternative-capitalist and non-capitalist

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[8]  They recognize diversity within capitalist activity.

[9]  The 'hegemony' of the capitalist system and neoliberalism is sometimes overemphasized, affording less 'power' to existing and possible non-capitalist or neoliberal conceptualizations and alternative relations and practices. However, I concur with Fletcher (2019) that this hegemony exists materially and discursively. This implies that other economies exist within this framework.

| Enterprise | Labour | Property | Transactions | Finance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CAPITALIST | WAGE | PRIVATE | MARKET | MAINSTREAM MARKET |
| ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST<br>• State-owned<br>• Environmentally responsible<br>• Socially responsible<br>• Non-profit | ALTERNATIVE PAID<br>• Self-employed<br>• Reciprocal labour<br>• In-kind<br>• Work for welfare | ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE<br>• State-managed assets<br>• Customary (clan) land<br>• Community trusts<br>• Indigenous knowledge (intellectual property) | ALTERNATIVE MARKET<br>• Fair trade<br>• Alternative currencies<br>• Underground market<br>• Barter | ALTERNATIVE MARKET<br>• Cooperative Banks<br>• Credit unions<br>• Community-based financial institutions land<br>• Micro-finance |
| NON-CAPITALIST<br>• Worker cooperatives<br>• Sole proprietorships<br>• Community enterprise<br>• Feudal<br>• Slave | UNPAID<br>• Housework<br>• Volunteer<br>• Self-provisioning<br>• Slave labour | OPEN ACCESS<br>• Atmosphere<br>• International waters<br>• Open source IP<br>• Outer space | NON-MARKET<br>• Household sharing<br>• Gift giving<br>• Hunting, fishing, gathering<br>• Theft, piracy, poaching | NON-MARKET<br>• Sweat equity<br>• Family lending<br>• Donations<br>• Interest-free loans |

**Figure 1**: The diverse economy (Gibson-Graham 2010: 228).

forms of the diverse economy (Figure 1) are not necessarily less exploitative or more liberating than capitalism (Burke and Shear 2014a; Samers 2005). Samers (2005) argues that when distinguishing between exploitative and progressive forms of the diverse economy, it is important to explore the relationships and processes of production, and the employment conditions in different forms of diverse economies.

This denaturalization of capitalism and the anti-essentialist re-reading of economic practices enables the ontological conception of 'community economies' (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2011). Community economies are "economic spaces or networks in which relations of interdependence are democratically negotiated by participating individuals and organizations" (Gibson-Graham 2008: 28). 'Community' in this approach

> …implies the need to re-socialise economic relations by adopting an ethical approach and recognising the interdependence of subjects and economic practices and going beyond an individualised performance without refusing or eliminating any singularity and individuality. (Gritzas and Kavoulatos 2016: 923)

(New) non- and alternative-capitalist economic knowledges, values, practices, relations and identities are, and can be, enacted in more ethical politico-economic decision-making by subjects. These, then, provide the foundation for 'a post-capitalist politics' (Gibson-Graham 2006), whereby community is a site of becoming, and community economies are the grounds for collective ethical economic decision-making through which new worlds are, and can be, constructed.

Acknowledging climate change, Gibson-Graham, along with others, urge us to rethink how to be humans. And to filter economic practices through an ethics of care for, and affective relationships with, humans and the more-than-human world (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010; Gibson-Graham 2011; Gibson Graham et al. 2013). Specifically, Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2010: 320) call for an economic ethics that nurtures the "being-in-common" of "all being(s), human and non-human, animate and inanimate, processual and fluid as well as categorical and definite in conception." This involves humans being transformed by the world they dwell in as part of "learning to be affected" (ibid: 322; see Latour 2004).[10] Learning to be affected as an ethical practice entails "developing an awareness of, and in the process being transformed by, co-existence." It is the basis for

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10 'Learning to be affected' implies an ongoing learning process.

an economy for a more-than-human world (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010: 325).

While these contributions are important for an economic ethics for a more-than-human world, in them environmental action tends to be considered "as a predominantly positive counterbalance to destructive capitalist processes" (Fletcher 2019: 12). This is despite evidence that environmental governance is also diverse, and includes seemingly progressive policies which (can) involve regressive socio-ecological outcomes. An example of the latter is the utility-scale renewable energy production discussed above. Lastly, the community economies approach includes six ethical coordinates around which community economies are being, and might be, built:

1. Survival: What do we really need to survive well? How do we balance our own survival needs and well-being with the well-being of others and the planet?

2. Commons: What do we share with human and non-human others? How do we maintain, replenish, and grow this natural and cultural commons?

3. Consumption: What do we really need to consume? How do we consume sustainably and justly?

4. Transactions: What is the range of ways we secure things we cannot produce ourselves? How do we conduct ethical encounters with human and non-human others in these transactions?

5. Investment: What do we do with stored wealth? How do we invest this wealth so that future generations may live well?

6. Surplus: What is left after our survival needs have been met? How do we distribute this surplus to enrich social and environmental health? (Community Economies 2019: np).

Some work brings ecological issues more centrally into the diverse/community economies approach, most notably from a political ecology approach (Fletcher 2019; Burke and Shear 2014b). Fletcher (2019) sets out an analytical framework of 'diverse ecologies' that maps diversity in environmental governance: with

diverse forms of environmental governance (strategies and practices) and their specific articulations (Figure 2). The integration of different governmentalities (e.g. neoliberal, communal) expressed in diverse economic arrangements is notable. Diverse subjectivities (can) emerge in their wake.[11]

Burke and Shear (2014b) edited a Special Section in the *Journal of Political Ecology* that advanced a non-capitalocentric political ecology for politicizing, reimagining and reconstructing nature-society relations. It explores community interventions, cases from the Community Economies Collectives, grassroots groups, and new collectivities in process and new openings created. The case studies are embedded in, or involve, non-capitalist values, practices, relations and politics, testifying to diverse 'non-capitalist political ecologies.' They examine how (new) ethics, values and knowledge are formed or enacted, reconceptualizing value and politics and facilitating new political possibilities. Johnson (2014) demonstrates how Inuit activists in the Canadian Arctic influenced international deliberations and negotiations for banning Persistent Organic Pollutants through mobilizing affect and reciprocity, and gifting a carving of the Inuit mother and child. She shows that these non-capitalist practices and politics are grounded in the Inuit's particular ethical affective relations with humans, more-than-humans and the land, which are created through non-capitalist subsistence practices. Burke and Shear conclude that semi-autonomous local organization better supports active participation in ethical deliberation and collective action (2014a: 139). Another finding is the "cascading effect of politicization": values constructed also involve the re-scaling of ethical consideration and, thus, local political action may cascade into other forms of political action in other realms. At the same time, "economic practices and logics emerging from the local can jump scales" (Burke and Shear 2014b: 139).

Meanwhile, other affirmative approaches are deployed in political ecology research, building on, inter alia, affect, care, animi-

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[11]  Governmentality denotes 'the arts of government'; how power is exercised in social relations to formulate the 'conduct' of individuals and govern relations (Foucault, 2008[1978-1979]).

sm and pluriversality (e.g. Collard et al. 2015; Singh 2013; Sullivan 2013, 2019). For instance, Singh (2013, 2015) explores community forest conservation in Odisha, India. She demonstrates how affective reciprocal relations with forests and related intimate practices of care and nurturing led to non capitalist ways of valuing more-than-human nature and, thus, to possibilities for challenging market-based conservation. Singh (2018) discusses 'affective political ecology', describing how focusing on affects affords a stronger appreciation of the interconnectedness of all beings. It enables us to (re)think becoming together with Earth others, other-than capitalist human subjectivities, and ecopolitics. Ecopolitics is reframed as embedded in care for the world from "a lived-in or kincentric ecological perspective" (p. 3). In various contributions, Sullivan provides an ontological avenue for more egalitarian and 'vivacious' socio-ecological sustainabilities based on animism (e.g. Sullivan 2013; 2019). Animism is an orientation "to enliven both nonhuman natures and understandings of what it means to be human in intimate, moving and maintaining improvisations with other-than-human worlds" (Sullivan 2013: 55). She sees existing animist ontologies as

> …among the social forces that can be mobilised and affirmed today in (re)configuring, (re)com posing (re)embodying culturenature relationships that are enlivened in support of the flourishing of life's diversity. (Sullivan 2013: 60)

Notable is the parallel extension of Foucault's 'care of the self' as care for humans and more-than humans and life itself, for an egalitarian and abundant ethics of life (Sullivan 2019). Collard et al. (2015: 322) call for new socio-ecological futures with "more diverse and autonomous forms of life and ways of living together", or else for "multispecies abundance." They offer political strategies for this, including acting in pluriversal rather than universal ways. This means embracing and enacting ontological multiplicity, for example by reinforcing practices and performances that articulate different worlds than those of imperial capitalism and colonialism.

These various approaches provide an affirmative lens through which to envisage, amongst others, the post-capitalist forms

| Philosophy | Principles | Policies | Subjectivities | Practices |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sovereignty (command-and-control) | Centralization Regulation Reclistribution | Legislation Taxation Subsidintion Fences and fines | Obedience to authority | Property State Private Communal Open access |
| Discipline (ethical injunction) | Normalization Self-regulation Citizenship | Education Marketing Surveillance | Normality Self-discipline Deferred gratification | Labor Wage Unpaid Alternative paid Collective |
| Neoliberalism (incentives) | Privatization Marketintion De/reregulation Commodification Market proxies Flanking mechs Measurementality | Direct markets Tradable permits Reverse auctions Coasean-type agreements Regulatory pricing Voluntary pricing | Homo economicus Self-interest Benefit-cost analysis Responsibility Competition | Transactions Market Alternative market Nonmarket |
| Truth (the order of things) | Divine revelation Appeal to sacred texts Spiritual practice Traditional knowledge | Religious decree Taboo spaces Spiritual possession | Vehicle for divine will Spirituality | Enterprtse Capitalist Alternative capitalist Noncapitalist |
| Communal (socialist. Participatory) | Socialization Communal production Commoning Participatory dedsion-making | Common property regimes Worker owned cooperatives Land reform Gifting | Collective responsibility Convivality Affective relations Care | Finance Market Alternative market Nonmarker |

**Figure 2:** Diverse ecologies. (Fletcher 2019: 15)

CRE can take (forms of enterprise, surplus distribution, subjectivities, etc.), the re scaling of ethical consideration[12] and ethico--political decision-making for CRE practices.

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[12] This includes, for example, ethical consideration on energy consumption, environmental destruction at the places of resource extraction and labor conditions in technology manufacturing.

# Post-capitalist RE development: Community Renewable Energy Ecologies (CREE)

## Ethico-political orientations

An alternative approach to (C)RE development first requires rethinking 'nature' and the world. It requires acknowledging 'nature' and society as belonging to the same settlement (the oikos). This means abandoning nature/society distinctions, or subject/object, and the Western consensual vision of 'nature' as external, singular, an object, an ecosystem service provider and a commodity. It means recognizing 'a more than-human world' (Abram 1996) defined by agency, heterogeneity, complexity and pluralism. It further implies acknowledging that we are entangled with more-than-humans in numerous flows and connections and relations. Our co-evolution involves humans, more-than-humans, cultures, things, bodies and so on coming together in networks, as well as nature and society evolving together (see *inter alia* Braun 2006; Swyngedouw 2011; Whatmore 2002, 2006).[13] Recognizing a common more-than-human world and evolution affirms the kinship between humans and more-than-humans: that we are kin with and not really different from 'earth others.'

This ontological reframing unveils the interconnectedness of entities, landscapes, processes, flows and outcomes (i.e. of life itself). It enables us to recognize the various socio-ecological impacts of climate change and the broader multispecies violence and injustices engendered by industrial development and (neoliberal) capitalism. More than this, we are urged by this form of 'reframing' to rethink how to be humans. The interconnectedness of relationships, processes and outcomes of renewable energy generation within and across locales, over time and across the value chain must be recognized. There are impacts on humans and more-than-humans and related injustices upstream, downstream and at the intermediary stages of the RE supply chain: from the places of resource extraction, through manufacturing, to energy

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[13]  Scholars call these networks 'socionatural assemblages', or 'rhizomatic networks', and our common evolution 'a socionatural evolution.'

production. Rethinking 'nature' and the world in this way, thus, invites ethical encounters in renewable energy production across the value chain and (time)scales for 'becoming-in-common.'

As Burke and Stephens (2017) suggest, conceptualizing energy and governing energy systems as commons is pivotal for energy democracy. A radical approach sees RE as a common good, rather than a commodity. Governance under commons-based peer production (CBPP)[14] reflects a distributed network of individuals freely participating and collaborating for producing shared value according to their rules, norms and needs without the driving factor of profit (Giotitsas et al. 2020). 'Commonification' rather than commodification of RE not only means changing ownership structures, but also creating common value systems and rules (echoing Giotitsas et al. 2020, Burke and Stephens 2017). A relational process of negotiating use, access, care, benefit and responsibility would create this common value (echoing Gibson Graham et al. 2013). Commoning involves more-than-humans. 'Becoming-in-common' means a social system characterized by a relational way of being, doing and benefiting. In this light:

> Working towards "a commons-creating economy" (Helfrich 2013) also means working towards the (re)constitution of relational world, ones in which the economy is re-embedded in society and nature…; it means the individual integrated within a community, the human within the nonhuman, and knowledge within the inevitable contiguity of knowing, being and doing. (Escobar 2015: np).

Ethico-political encounters of this type, and cultivating the anti-capitalist self, means other-than capitalist subjectivities and a different kind of person (an ethico-political subject, echoing Gibson-Graham 2006). An ethico-political individual emerges from embodied, reciprocal and affective practices and relations with humans and the more-than-human world, someone who cares for other humans and more-than-humans, and life itself as part of caring for the self (echoing Sullivan 2019) and encourages ethico--political decisions for 'multispecies abundance' (echoing Collard

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[14]   On CBPP, see Bauwens et al. (2019).

et al. 2015). This individual promotes "an other power of life that strives toward an alternative existence" (Hardt and Negri 2009: 57). It is a communal subject that nurtures the 'becoming-in-common' and what Fletcher (2019) calls a 'liberatory' or 'communal governmentality.' Namely, exercising power based on collective responsibility, care and affective relations for liberatory ways of becoming together with humans and earth others (see also Figure 2).[15]

Renewable energy production under CREE can proceed according to collective ethico-political deliberation and decision-making that: 1) acknowledges interrelationships; 2) goes beyond individual and local collective benefits; 3) embodies care for and affective relations between humans and between humans and earth others; and 4) is oriented towards a commons-based economy for more 'thriving' and egalitarian sustainabilities. The six ethical coordinates of the community economies approach above are also important, and those coordinates regarding energy production (Table 1).

Collective ethico-political decision-making under CREE, then, reflects a post-capitalist politics –an oikopolitics– embodying care for, and affective relations with, humans and more-than-humans from a 'kincentric' ontological perspective (echoing Singh 2018). Such an oikopolitics is oriented towards more 'vivacious' and liberatory ways of living (Collard et al. 2015). Aside from responding to the climate and ecological crisis and transforming the workings of capitalism, it is a progressive composition and performance of our common world (echoing Latour 2004) and so begs "constant negotiation with human and 'earth others'" (Community Economies 2019: np).

To summarize, Community Renewable Energy Economies recognize and support the diversity and autonomy of life and its collective constitution based on cooperation, solidarity, egalitarianism and kinship (Table 1). None of this suggests imposing particular systems of knowledge, values, ethics and politics upon local communities. Rather, we need a recognition of the kinship and intimate relations between humans and more-than-humans. Further, CREE reflect what already exists but is 'hidden': socio-

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15    Power also has a liberatory dimension (see Fletcher 2019)

-ecologies that reject the nature/society binary and embody relational ontologies based on affect and perceptions of 'sacred' or animate more-than-human nature. Relational ontologies are evidenced by a vast array of anthropological work (e.g. Johnson 2014; Sullivan 2010; Viveiros de Castro 2004). They are also articulated in cases of CRE (i.e. the Maori case above) and of local opposition to non-community renewable energy (Dunlap 2019). Lastly, as Singh (2018: 4) elucidates:

> While affective relations and life's generative capacity are object-targets of disciplining and capital accumulation, there is always an 'excess' that escapes capital's grasp (Hardt and Negri 2004; Anderson 2010). This 'excess', or what Massumi (2002) terms the 'autonomy' of affect, opens up possibilities for new modes of being...

## Ethico-political considerations for building CREE

I now address how CREE can be formed according to these orientations and coordinates. I focus on the key constitutive elements for RE projects, such as enterprise, labor, technology and financing, and show how specific choices for these can (better) facilitate RE development for more 'thriving' and egalitarian sustainabilities.

### Projects for abundant and egalitarian futures

Small RE prosumption projects are most in line with these ethico-political orientations. They entail smaller interventions, less RE technology, less resource use, and can lead to ethical practices discussed above. Meanwhile, medium-scale RE projects, involving prosumption and sale of surplus energy, can provide revenues that can be allocated in supporting other worthwhile community economies or practices. These sales are not profit-oriented. They prioritize benefits for all rather than for the few.

Enterprise, land and labor: beyond mainstream market logics Cooperatives are a better option for CREE than other forms of enterprise, as they are collectively owned and managed by their members and include equal voting rights, notwithstanding

the shares each member holds. Thus, they are more egalitarian, better enabling collective deliberation and decision-making.

Different types of labor can be involved. Cooperative members can work for self-provisioning (i.e. for providing oneself with energy to consume and additionally individual income for living well). They can also carry out caring labor (i.e. work for individual and collective well-being). Expert labor by non-members may be brought in, for example to install RE infrastructure. This offers opportunities for local individuals. It may be compensated in non-monetary ways, through exchange of services and products, or volunteering. There may not be conventional job creation and wages, but caring and working collaboratively to create common value are recognized. Transparent and fair land ownership arrangements are also key for socially just CREE. Communal or community-owned and private land provided for a power installation can be in the form of an energy share in a commons-based economy. The cooperative can manage the land under collective responsibility and care for the benefit of all involved. Such an alternative economic logic would reduce dependency on monetary exchange, and foster a relational process where benefit, use, access, care and responsibility are negotiated.

## Infrastructure, mechanisms and technology for commoning RE

A microgrid comprises small energy generation units within a defined boundary. It operates autonomously, and can be installed in remote areas at significantly lower cost, compared to making connection to central power (see Giotitsas et al. 2015).[16] An autonomous microgrid collectively owned and managed by a cooperative is a better option than a long-term connection to a central grid under so-called net-metering, as typically seen in RE prosumption projects. A microgrid can facilitate commons-based RE production, reducing reliance on higher-order systems. Collective decision-making by the cooperative's members can determine the RE share each member will get. Excess RE not consumed can

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[16] Giotitsas et al. (2015) suggest microgrids, a common RE pool and open technology in peer-to-peer (P2P) modes.

| Type | Category | Coordinates/Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Community economies | Survival | What do we really need to survive well? How do we balance on our survival needs and well-being with the well-being of others and the planet? |
| | Commons | What do we share with human and non-human others? How do we maintain, replenish, and growth this natural and cultural commons? |
| | Consumption | What do we really need to consume? How do we consume sustainably and justly? |
| | Transactions | How do we secure the things we cannot produce ourselves? How do we conduct ethical encounters with human and non-human others in these transactions? |
| | Investment | What do we do with stored wealth? How do we invest this wealth for future generations to live well? |
| | Surplus | What is left after our survival needs have been met? How do we distribute this surplus to enrich social and environmental health? |
| CREE | Impacts | How does our energy consumption and other consumptive practices that need energy and resources ( e.g. on technology) impact on the climate, humans and earth others? |
| | | Examples: Consider impacts on the climate, human health and 'earth others' from conventional energy production. Consider impacts of RE projects on local groups/individuals ( e.g. land grabbing, loss of livelihoods ). Consider labor realities in manufacturing RE technologies. |
| | Survival/ Consumption | How much energy, and what quality and quantity of products, do we really need to consume to live a fulfilled life and flourish along with human and 'earth others'? Do we need to scale up RE production or to scale down energy consumption? |
| | | Example: Consider rethinking specific choices on energy and product consumption for reducing aforementioned impacts. |
| | Commons/ Encounters | What encounters between humans and between humans and more-than-humans are found in CRE within/across places, (time)scales and the value chain? |
| | | Examples: Consider impacts on 'earth others' from natural resource extraction formanufacturing wind turbines and solar panels ( e.g. co balt, rare earth minerals, oil). Consider exploitive/slave labor for resource extraction and e-waste handling. Consider unequal power relations within and in relation to communities engaged in CRE and procedural/distributive justice. |
| | Commoning/ Transactions/ Investment | How can we (creatively) produce the energy we (wish to) consume, making these encounters more just and reproducing (our) life's material and nou-material aspects?What praxes can we engage in for commoning RE, whilst 'becoming-in-common'? |
| | | Examples: Consider small RE prosumption projects for reduced energy consumption and resource extraction, collectively created, shared and managed. Consider more just technologies. |
| | Surplus/ Support | How can our RE producing activities actively support economies and ecologies with alternative ethical orientations and influence collective ethico-political decision-making for other economic activities and in other domains? |
| | | Examples: Consider financial support to, or alliances with, other community economies, and informative events on CREE for the wider public. |

**Table 1:** Ethical coordinates for CREE.

form a common RE pool within the microgrid and be allocated where it might be needed amongst members, avoiding wastage. The infrastructure (microgrid and RE generation units) and the RE produced are collectively owned, managed and shared by the cooperative's members, creating common value.

If the RE project generates surplus electricity (a cap on which can be defined by the cooperative), or the cooperative allows for RE sale, then the microgrid can connect and sell RE to the central grid.[17] A flexible net-metering mechanism allowing revenue generation is the best available option, rather than reduced electricity bills. Feed-in-tariffs (FiTs) and feed-in-premiums (FiPs) are other options. In the commonly-used 'auction systems', cooperatives may get marginalized in favor of centralized producers. The RE produced is collectively owned and shared by the cooperative and excess RE is collectively managed. Nearby microgrids can form a larger peer-to-peer (P2P) grid operating under the same rules as the microgrids involved, with excess RE from each microgrid forming a bigger common RE pool managed by the cooperatives. Excess RE can be allocated to microgrids within the P2P grid (Giotitsas et al. 2015) according to collective decision making that attends to the needs of the communities involved based on care and solidarity, after which any excess can be sold. Collapse of one microgrid would not compromise the system (ibid).

A microgrid is part of a more just economy. Collective decision-making on RE technology is also important. For example, this could mean choosing solar panels manufactured domestically under better working and labor conditions than those from the main Asian suppliers. Technology should be locally sourced, through exchange trading systems if possible. Advancing commons-based peer production means utilizing open source software, open machinery and, where suitable given energy outputs and connection issues, open RE technologies that can be manufactured locally.[18]

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[17] Halton Lune Hydro, a community hydro scheme developed by a housing cooperative in North West England, is an example. It supplies up to 1,000 MWh of electricity a year. http://haltonlunehydro.org

[18] For details on open machinery see OpenSourceEcology (2020). For open RE technologies see Raniersolarpanel (2020) and Kostakis et al. (2013).

The aim is for CREE to 'bypass' as much as possible the mainstream market and advance alternative socioeconomic paradigms that prioritize common value based on collective responsibility, collaboration and care for humans and 'earth others.'

## Financing and surplus: supporting other performances

As Hinshelwood highlights, when "a community group initiates an idea and leads a project, sourcing funding directly, there is a greater potential for residents to maintain control of the ideas" (2001: 95, emphasis in the original). In this light, self-financing under cooperatives is a good choice for CREE, as it reduces dependency on others, better facilitating inclusive democratic negotiation and decision-making by members. Crowdfunding platforms that support open and commons-oriented projects (e.g. the Goteo platform) can generate funding for energy projects, together with capital from members. For example, services, materials and infrastructure can be contributed by platform members. Any innovation (e.g. organizational, technical) can then be openly shared to the platform (see for example Hidalgo 2015 on Goteo) for use by other communities and for familiarizing other individuals with this post-capitalist economic practice.

Cooperatives are a good option for the sale of surplus renewable energy. A cooperative is not profit oriented and better enables focusing on more egalitarian and 'vivacious' ways of becoming. Net earnings are not divided according to shareholding structure, but rather pro rata amongst members according to the volume of transactions they have conducted with the enterprise (Bauwens et al. 2016). When part of the net income from sales is allocated as a return on capital shares, profit distribution is subject to a cap, and cooperatives do not have legal obligations to maximize return to shareholders (Jahanisova et al. 2015). Financial speculation of shares is usually forbidden, discouraging maximization of return on capital, aiding the cooperative's long-term existence and initial motivations (ibid). Monetary wealth generated can be shared also with non-members. Namely, earnings can be partly distributed amongst CREE members under a cap for the reproduction of their

lives' (non) material aspects and partly allocated to existing or new community economies and/or (new) local economic activities and initiatives. CREE, then, can directly support ontological multiplicity and other transformative practices. Alternatively, some earnings can be partly allocated to communities across the value chain for creating further common value.

## Organization and operation: care, affect and openness

Cooperative governance offers equal voting rights for members, without barriers to enrolling new members (Bauwens et al. 2016). A key factor is the inclusion of less advantaged individuals who can usually join in projects by providing labor instead of capital, retaining the same right to a share in earnings and renewable energy (see Jahanisova et al. 2015). Alternatively, each (prospective) member can provide a small percentage of additional capital for collectively enabling these individuals to actively engage in projects on more favorable terms. Moreover, collective responsibility, solidarity and care for others are pivotal for project operation and for collectively deciding how common (pool) renewable energy is allocated within and to other microgrids (e.g. RE shares). Also, if possible, provisions and agreements with a central grid can be made for selling RE more affordably to poor households outside the microgrids, also reflecting care for less advantaged individuals.

Making all information on strategy, business, finances and so on open access enables knowledge sharing with, and use by, other CREE and the wider public. This reflects values of openness and sharing of CBPP and could influence ethico-political decision-making by non-members. Finally, a strategy of replication (i.e. more smaller cooperatives than one larger) could facilitate stronger affective social bonds and interpersonal connections between members and non-members (echoing Hicks and Ison 2011).

## Capacity building and alliances: enacting other worlds

Drawing on the different existing capacities within local communities can significantly contribute to capacity building and successful project operation. Further ways to build capacity include

building knowledge and bridges between CRE or CREE projects and existing community economies (for example, members of the Community Economies Collective) for sharing information, experiences and skill development. This is important for less-connected or remote communities. Producing common value in this way can foster broader CREE networks of support and solidarity for post-capitalist futures, and may include collective explorations of new open software or renewable energy technology. New collaborations and affective relationships along the RE value chain can bind (distant) communities together. Further, informative and educational events for familiarizing the public with this form of RE development, as well as on broader issues on energy consumption, climate change, industrial development and so on, can foster the re-scaling of ethical considerations by non-participating individuals. Alliances with community or intermediary organizations can help with project implementation and collaborations with communities involved in the RE value chain.

Good capacity building can facilitate the 'uptake' of CREE through new alliances. The alliances proposed here are important for facilitating a broader oikopolitics and global transformations. They require careful examination and explicit attention to maintaining CREE orientations.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed one possibility for alternative sustainabilities, reframing the development of renewable energy and forming the notion of CREE. This framework and the notion are not prescriptive, but describe a different focus, ethico-political orientation, and particularities. They are open to (re)conceptualization by local knowledge and experience, research, and an ongoing learning process. Ultimately, the precise configurations of CREE rest on negotiation at multiple levels and social innovation, as CREE reflect social laboratories for new more just, enlivened and 'abundant' socio-ecologies. CREE should not be a priori judged as more progressive or less exploitative than other RE production forms.

CREE outcomes cannot be assumed nor predicted, as research shows that practice can diverge widely from theory. Socio-natures are heterogeneous, complex and (often) unpredictable.

The article employed critique and its lessons in forming an alternative affirmative approach for RE development and in providing specific suggestions, without these taking a secondary role. While critique and talk of alternatives to capitalist practices can indeed sometimes reinforce the centrality of capitalism as a reference point, deploying critique productively is necessary for articulating other worlds beyond capitalism. This means affirming both 'the hatchet' and the 'seed' of political ecology and working beyond the sticky binary of critique and affirmation (Alhojärvi and Sirviö 2018).[19] I argue that CREE, as envisioned here, are better aligned with mitigating climate and ecological crises and more 'thriving' egalitarian futures for humans and more-than-humans than conventional approaches to renewable energy.

The alternative framework sketched here echoes calls from within political ecology for finding possibilities amidst devastation, and for forming other worlds (e.g. Alhojärvi and Sirviö 2018). The article is only a starting point: not all aspects, interacting processes, technology issues or prospects for CREE were covered here. Transitioning away from capitalist RE development to CREE is not easy. Amongst other things, it requires supporting individuals and communities who lack the ability to alter the power relations they are embedded in, and strengthening their capacity for pursuing CREE. For example, this means mobilizing other than-capitalist valuation logics and languages in different arenas. It also means sharing knowledge, skills and (financial) resources with less knowledgeable and affluent groups. Materializing CREE further requires action and struggle to generate (more) favourable legislative frameworks where they do not exist. This entails building new alliances and capacities between social movements and between various actors for political contestation targeted at local, regional and central governments. Scientists

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[19] On the 'hatchet' and the 'seed' of political ecology, see Robbins (2012).

can aid in these endeavours and actively support the building of CREE, through participatory action research for example.[20] The latter can be particularly helpful for shifting unequal power relations within and surrounding communities.

This article does not reflect a hopelessly optimistic view, but rather an affirmation that new and more just socio-ecological orders can come into being; if the history of social movements and struggles has taught us anything it is that struggle and collective actions can indeed change the world, little by little.

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[20]  See for example Ulsrud et al. (2018) for an action research project on village-level solar power systems in Kenya.

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Rita Calvário[1]

# Edible Revolutions: Food, Power, and Postcapitalist Transformation[2]

This chapter explores food as both a lens and a strategic site for social transformation, critically examining the limits of framing strategy through the dichotomy of prefigurative and contentious politics. Drawing on diverse food movements, from food alternatives to food justice and food sovereignty, it argues for a plural, context- sensitive approach that combines grassroots alternatives, social mobilisation, state engagement, and structural change. Central to this is a relational view of power, shaped from above and negotiated and contested from below, with the everyday as a key site of struggle. La Vía Campesina's movement- and alliance- -building experience exemplifies how solidarity and mutual transformation of intersecting identities and scales can counter social fragmentation and contribute to advancing systemic change.

## Introduction

This chapter engages with food as an entry point into the conversation about systemic change, departing from the premise that meaningful change in food systems is inseparable from a broader societal shift away from capitalism.

The way in which food production, distribution, and consumption is organised, and reproduced, is profoundly rooted in the

capitalist mode of production and its underlying logics of dispossession, commodification, and accumulation. Without challenging and transforming these dynamics, any food systemtransformationtowards more just power relations and socioecologies will always be incomplete. But food is not only a site of material and cultural inequality and exclusion; it is also one of resistance and transformation. Food activism is a potent domain where to engage in, and catalise struggles for postcapitalist transformation. Moreover, its development is informed by strategic thinking and intentional action.

Drawing on feminist theories of social reproduction, this chapter also begins from the understanding that struggles over the means and conditions of sustaining life, such as those related to access to and control over food, are not marginal to class struggle. Social reproduction theory highlights the everyday labour that sustains life —oftenunpaid, feminised, and racialised— as central to the functioning of capitalist economies. From this perspective, fights for food are not merely about nutrition, ecological balance, consumption, or production. Though often dispersed and fragmented, they embody broader efforts to reclaim collective control over the very conditions of life. These are not peripheral or symbolic struggles; they are deeply political, with the potential to reconfigure the very foundations of social and economic life, including our relationship with nature. Moreover, these theoretical approaches foreground the everyday as a crucial site to expose how power operates, being thus fundamental as a starting point for political engagement and action.

This perspective on food as a key site for social change, raises two important questions: first, the task of imagining alternatives, i.e., what a just and sustainable food system might look like; and second, the strategic question of how to shift power relations and reconfigure existing systems.

While some may view the act of imagining alternatives as irrelevant, as radically transforming social relations can open up new, unforeseen possibilities, this chapter takes a different stance: not only imagining alternatives is important to define a

horizon of struggle centered around the collective ownership of the means of production and societal well-being, as it is about reclaiming knowledges and practices often dismissed or rendered invisible within capitalism. These alternative ways of knowing and doing can inspire transformative pathways rooted in care, reciprocity, and cooperation. Such an approach calls for more than mere reformist adjustments to food systems and capitalism; it demands openess to diverse forms of social organisation and a willingness to learn from both existing and experimental models. Furthermore, it emphasises the interconnectedness between the social, economic, ecological, and political realms, compelling us to interrogate dominant notions of development and modernity.

The question of strategy requires us to understand what capitalism is, and how it operates within specific spatial and temporal configurations, but also demand us to examine how power is exercised, contested, and reimagined in everyday life; to critically interrogate the roles of grassroots practices, social movements, markets, and the state; to consider the strengths and limitations of prefigurative versus contentious politics; and, importantly, to assume a commitment to build popular power (rooted in subaltern groups) capable of enacting, and sustaining long-term, structural change. Taken together, these challenges underline the need for a political ecology of food systems that is both grounded and utopian, rooted in material realities while remaining imaginative and an activator of social struggles in, against, and beyond capitalism.

## The political ecology of food systems

Food is more than a biological need or a cultural symbol; it is a site where power, social hierarquies, and structural dynamics of domination/subalternity are expressed, reproduced, and potentially challenged. Through a political ecology lens, food becomes as a prism through which the broader logic of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy are made visible. It also enlightens the complex interplay between ecological conditions and social rela-

tions in building food systems. And it becomes a crucial site for better compreheending the promises and failures of modernity.

In result, it urges us to interrogate structural inequalities tied to land, labor, culture, and community, among other dimensions. It raises critical questions: Who owns and controls the land? Who is excluded from it? How is land commodified, enclosed, or reclaimed? Who performs the labor that sustains food systems, and under what conditions? Who has access to food, what kinds of food are available, and through what means? How are food memory, identity, and tradition dismissed, preserved or revived, particularly among Indigenous, diasporic, and marginalised communities? How do communities organise themselves around food? Do they forge networks of care, resistance, and solidarity, or do they risk reproducing or exacerbating patterns of fragmentation and exclusion?

Such analysis can also reveal how these inequalities are contested, and possibly undone. Food intersects with struggles for justice, such as fair wages, equitable access to nutritious food, and reparative practices for historically marginalised communities. It raises questions of sovereignty, i.e., the right of communities to define their own food systems, rooted in local knowledge, autonomy, and self-determination. It links to transformative ambitions, where extractive, industrial models are challenged-bycommunity-led alternatives that prioritise care, ecological sustainability, social equity, and collective organising.

Food emerges thus as both a site of struggle and a space of possibility. From resisting corporate land grabs and agro-industrial monopolies to building food cooperatives, urban gardens, and agroecological networks, people and communities are not only claiming for survival, but they are reclaiming power and making new worlds.

In result, struggles around food hold a compelling potential for radical reimaginationand transformation. Within food activism, two dominant strategic orientations can be identified. One centers on prefigurative politics, the other focuses on contentious politics. These approaches, while distinct, often intersect and coexist within distinct food movements.

The following sections dig deeper into these strategic orientations and the dilemmas they entail, before expanding the analysis through a critical exploration of debates within food activism, particularly around food alternatives, food justice, and food sovereignty.

## Prefigurative politics: performing alternative futures in the present

Alternative food initiatives are often understood as embodying a prefigurative politics. This entails the creation in the 'here and now' of a more just, democratic and sustainable society, including, for instance, "the development of consensus-oriented decision-making procedures, the democratisation and 'horizontisation' of organisational structures and the establishment of alternative relations of property, power and production." (Sande, 2013, p. 232)

A prefigurative politics includes ends-means consistency, integration of future ideals into everyday practice, and direct action. Therefore, it has an experimental and exploratory nature, and it is immediate, active, and transformative. In food systems, this might take the form of agroecological farming, food cooperatives, community- supported agriculture, as well as reclaiming land for community use, establishing autonomous zones, or building infrastructures that meet people's needs outside state or market control.

These actions are not rehearsals for a distant revolution: they are the revolutioninmotion, grounded in the convictions that the seeds for the future must be sown in the present. Rather than waiting for systemic change to be delivered through top-down reform or revolutionary rupture, "a prefigurative approach seeks to create the new society 'in the shell of the old' [...]. In this sense, a prefigurative strategy is based on the principle of direct action, of directly implementing the changes one seeks, rather than asking others to make the changes on one's behalf." (Leach, 2003, p. 1004)

Prefigurative politics usually is evaluated according to two distinct strategic orientations (Yates, 2020). One is characterised by a rejection of strategy because it has no explicit political goals, nor does it focus on building an organisational structure for

advancing change. It focuses on lived experience, moral communities, and cultural transformations, emphasising the refusal to participate in oppressive systems, and to fight on the terms set by dominant institutions (Breines, 1989). Similarly, Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) approach of diverse economies look at the economy as a hybrid, containing no capitalist 'essence' than would limit the possibility of change from within the economy. Thereby, its aim it to give visibility to non-capitalist forms of production and reproduction in order to inspire change.

The other orientation understands prefiguration as a strategy in itself. Here, everyday actions are seen as performative acts of rebellion, as gestures aspiring "to reiventing daily life as a whole" (Graeber, 2002, p. 332). Maeckelbergh (2011, 14) argues that the goal is to "slowly make the state and multilateral organizations obsolete", not by confrontation but through irrelevance. Holloway's (2010) concept of "anti-power"and Hardt and Negri's (2009) "counter-power" similarly stress the creation of "cracks" in the system, spaces where new social relations can florish and confront capitalism. Erik Olin Wright's (2020) notion of "real utopias" captures this strategic vision: building socially empowered institutions from the bottom up that demonstrate viable alternatives and gradually erode the dominance of economic capitalist structures.

The strategic implications of prefigurative politics are significant. Rather than confronting the state head-on, the objective is to build autonomous, self-sustaining alternatives that make the state, and capitalist institutions increasingly irrelevant. Strategy is not imposed from above but emerges immanently from practice. As Sande (2013) puts it, what matters is how means and ends mutually evolve within the process of struggle.

This approach challenges typical understandings of political action that view power as something to seize or resist, emphasising power as emergent, as being (also) produced through social interactions and collective practices. Therefore, prefigurative politics highlights the importance of process over rigid classifications, focusing on the lived dynamics of political struggle rather than predefined categories such as "defensive" or "transformative" po-

litical action. This perspective may offer a richer understanding of struggle and social mobilisation, moving beyond 'external' evaluations that are detached from the concrete motion of politics.

For instance, in analysing the anti-austerity protests that swept Southern Europe during the 2008 economic crisis, dismissed by some as merely defensive responses to neoliberal restructuring, for the Greek case, Kaika and Karaliotas (2014, 28) showed the importance of the *Indignados*' movement not only in resisting austerity measures, but in actively reshaping political imagination and practices on the long-run, grounded in solidarity and collective organising, in opposition to emerging exclusionary, nativist, reactionary views rooted in far-right ideals.

However, a prefigurative approach is criticised by abstracting "the political" from its historical and geographical contexts, overlooking the situated nature of struggle in specific social relations and material conditions shaped by structural factors. This tendency can lead to a romantisation of the building of alternatives or autonomous spaces, without fully engaging with the complexities of political engagement; it may also result in an essentialisation of these alternatives and spaces as inherently free from inequalities and opressions.

Many analyses grounded on prefiguration also adopt a benign view of crises, understood as a 'natural' opening for transformation. While crises can indeed serve as catalysts for social action, this perspective risks overlooking the uneven distribution of their impacts across different social groups and minimise the reality of human suffering. It may also idealise social change without confronting the structural conditions that produce vulnerability and block collective action. Furthermore, without a clear strategy to challenge state power, such an approach leaves intact a central pillar of elite dominance within capitalist systems.

In sum, while a focus on prefiguration may offer valuable insights into how people actively resist oppressive power relations in their everyday lives and strive to build more liveable worlds, and this is undoubtedly a vital dimension of political thought and practice, its strategic limitations must be critically acknowledged.

# Contentious politics: confronting power through collective action

Contentious politics refers to forms of collective action that aim for systemic change by directly confrontating existing power structures, such as states, corporations, or elites. It views power as centralised and hierarchichal. Its goal is to expose structural contradictions, interrup the normal functioning of political, economic, or social systems, and force societal change.

Unlike routine political participation, contentious politics emerges when people mobilise to challenge inequalities, resist repression, or demand transformation. These actions are often reactive, triggered by crises, state violence, or perceived injustices, but they are also strategic, aimed at shifting the balance of power, altering public discourse, and opening space for new possibilities.

Contentious politics encompasses a wide repertoire of tactics, ranging from mass protests, strikes, civil disobedience to revolutions. These tactics are not mutually exclusive and are often combined in dynamic ways. Movements adapt their strategies in response to repression, opportunity, and internal debates.

While contentious politics is often associated with rupture, it is not limited to it. As Erik Olin Wright argues, effective movements frequently combine multiple strategic orientations, such as rupture strategies that aim to break decisively with existing institutions (e.g., revolutions); reformist strategies by working within institutions to achieve incremental change (e.g., policy advocacy); and interstitial strategies aimed at building alternatives in the "cracks" of the system (e.g., cooperatives, autonomous zones) (Burawoy, 2020).

A key point advanced in this chapter is that practical alternatives are not separate from contentious politics; they are often essential to it. Everyday practices such as community gardening, solidarity economies, or cooperative food systems may be perceived as apolitical, symbolic, prefigurative, or aligned with "anti-power". Yet, these practices can also function as acts of re-

sistance against dispossession, exploitation, and opression, while simultaneously expanding the terrain of social struggle. Rather than dismissing these practices from the start, we must recognise their strategic potential. They can help to create the material and subjective conditions for broader social mobilisation. In this sense, contentious politics is not only about confrontation, it is also about construction.

The effectiveness of a plural strategy of contentious politics is deeply shaped by specific historical, geographical, and institutional contexts. Movements must navigatea complex landscape of structural constraints, such as state repression, capital's mechanics, mainstream cultural narratives, and fragmentation of the subaltern classes. As a result, strategic choices unfold within the messy, and shifting conditions of social struggle. As such, "counter-power" strategies that focus solely on resistance without engaging with this complexity, and without seeking to challenge state power, risk becoming isolated and politically marginal, operating at the periphery of substantive change.

In a context marked by climate collapse, the resurgence of authoritarianism, deepening economic precarity, and rising hyper-individualism, a multi-pronged strategy of contentious politics must also pay close attention to the everyday. Rebuilding daily life, rehumanising social relationships, and fostering solidarity among subaltern and marginalised groups are not only vital for survival; they are also key towards restoring a sense of collective purpose and inspiring hope in the possibility of alternative futures, both of which are fundamental for mobilising collective action and strenghtening the social capacity to confront dominant powers.

This chapter calls for a critical engagement with prefigurative and contentious politics approaches for both its potentials and blind spots, and urges us to overcome analytical and normative silos in order to better compreheend the complex dynamics of transformative social action. A look into food activism may help to clarify these points.

# Food justice: structural inequality and community empowerment

The global food system is in the midst of a multidimensional crisis, characterisedbywidespread hunger, poor nutrition, rising of diet-related diseases, environmental problems linked to soil erosion, biodiversity loss, water depletion, and disappearance of farms and rural depopulation. These are not isolated problems but systemic outcomes of an industrial, profit-driven agricultural model.

In response, a diverse landscape of food alternatives developed, such as organic agriculture, fair trade, the Slow Food movement, Community Supported Agriculture, Km0, and local food systems. These initiatives seek to reclaim food systems through values of sustainability, justice, and community, offering not only practical solutions but also a deeper critique of the dominant food regime. As Allen (2004) notes, they represent "persistent, patterned, and widely distributed collective challenges to the *status quo*," pointing toward more equitable and ecologically grounded food futures.

However, as Allen (2008) warns, without a focus on social justice, this type of initiatives may reproduce the same power dynamics as global, industrial food systems, creating marginal, safe spaces for the privileged rather than transformative alternatives for society as a whole.

The concept of food justice emerged in the 1990s as a response to the class and race- based elitism within the mainstream food movement, especially in the U.S. Rooted in radical political struggles, particularly the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement, food justice reframes food not just as a nutritional or sustainability issue but as a site of racial, economic, and political struggle. A powerful example is the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children Program, which addressed hunger while building community autonomy and political consciousness. The Panthers understood food as deeply entangled with systemic oppression and used it as a tool for liberation (Patel, 2011; 2025).

Within this approach, scholars and activists have increasingly challenged the assumption that 'organic', 'local', or 'community-

based' food systems are inherently just. While often celebrated as alternatives to industrial agriculture, these models can obscure deeper inequalities and fail to confront structural racismand economicexclusion (Lyson, 2004). Research has revealed that many of alternative food networks are based in a cultural elitism that alienates working-class and racialised groups (Guthman, 2008), often underrepresenting the communities most affected by food insecurity (Guthman, 2011), while contributing to reproduce whiteness andcolor-blind ideologies (Alkon & McCullen, 2011; Anguelovski, 2015). Moreover, when marginalised communities are included, they are often framed through a deficit lens, as lacking knowledge or capacity, rather than recognised as agents of change(Figueroa, 2015). Alternative food networks frequently focus on consumer choice and lifestyle, overlooking structural issues such as land access, labor rights, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and racial capitalism (Wittman et al., 2010; Alkon&Agyeman, 2011).

In contrast, food justice activism seeks to directly address these limitations. It aims to confront the structural barriers to food access and reclaim cultural foodways, recognising that food systems are deeply embedded in racialised labor, gendered roles, and class-based exclusion. Grounded in the lived experiences of those most impacted by food inequality, food justice emphasises community-led responses that meet immediate needs while building long-term empowerment. In this approach, developing local food systems aims to address basic food needs, expand access to environmental and health benefits, and foster autonomy and collective power to the underserved and lower classes, thus integrating environmental sustainability with social justice goals, or what Alkon and Agyeman (2011) term as "just sustainability".

Besides developing practical alternatives, food justice often involves advocacy for equitable food policies, reclaiming state intervention to ensure fair distribution of nutritious food. Moreover, activists work to reclaim cultural food identities, promote autonomy and self-reliance, and strengthen community empowerment.

All of these efforts reflect a broader vision of food as a tool for social change. As Mares and Peña (2011), Morales (2011), Mc-

Cutcheon (2011), and others have shown, food justice is about transforming systems, not just accessing them.

While food justice has emerged as a powerful framework for addressing systemic inequalities in food systems, it is not exempt from critique. As the movement has grown, so too have concerns about its strategic coherence, political depth, and susceptibility to co-optation. Scholars have noted a decline in structural critiques of capitalism and racism, with some strands of food justice discourse invoking a notion of grassroots-driven transition that risks detaching from the broader systems of domination it seeks to challenge (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011).

One of the most pressing critiques is that food justice, in some of its mainstream articulations, has become entangled with neoliberal logic. As Constance et al (2014, 20) notes, the movement increasingly "fits well within the neoliberal agenda of the globalisation of the agrifood system", emphasising individual choice over collective action, and filling the void left by state withdrawal rather than contesting it. This neoliberalisation critique reflects a broader trend in which responsibility for systemic problems is devolved to individuals and communities, while the structural drivers of inequality, namely corporate power, state deregulation, and racial capitalism, remain unchallenged. In this context, food justice risks becoming a palliative rather than a transformative force.

As many food justice initiatives emphasise local, community-based solutions, while these can be empowering, they often rest on idealised notions of community that obscure internal hierarchies and broader structural forces. As Allen (2008, 2010) andGoodman et al. (2012) argue, romanticising the 'local' can mask inequalities and can limit the movement's capacity to scale or confront systemic power.

The stress on ethical consumption and market-based solutions, such as supporting local farmers, can obscure deeper structural constraints like poverty, labour exploitation, and land dispossession. As Guthman (2004) and Allen and Kovach(2000) warn, alternative food systems are at risk of conventionalisation: being absorbed into the mainstream without challenging its

core logic. Even when appearing radical or positioned outside the mainstream, such initiatives can inadvertently"produce and reproduce neoliberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities,"thereby reinforcing the very systems they seek to dismantle (Guthman, 2008, p. 1171).

Likewise, the most autonomous food spaces remain embedded in capitalist and state systems; they are shaped by laws, market pressures, and financial dependencies. Moreover, the economic burdens of ethical food production often fall on small-scale farmers and producers, who must navigate precarious markets while upholding values of sustainability and justice (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

In light of these critiques, scholars like Julie Guthman (2008) urge us to interrogate the micro-politics of activist projects: What strategic decisions undergird them? How are these strategies operationalised? What kinds of subjectivities do they produce?And how do place-based contingencies shape their outcomes?

This reflexive approach calls for a critical awareness of the limits and contradictions within food justice activism. It demands attention to power relations, structural constraints, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable questions about complicity, cooptation, and strategic effectiveness.

However, building spaces of autonomy in itself can be relevant to achieve broader goals of justice. For many Indigenous communities, food is about reclaiming traditional foodways as a precondition for social justice. Food justice initiatives can also serve as spaces of healing for communities impacted by colonisation, displacement, and systemic violence. Reconnecting through food may help restore cultural memory, rebuild community ties, and address intergenerational trauma, potentially reworking subjectivities and enacting collective action to confront injustices.

At the heart of these debates are competing ontologies of justice:

- A neoliberal conception frames justice as individual responsibility, emphasising personal choice and market access while ignoring structural inequalities. It often justifies minimal state intervention and privatised solutions.

- A liberal conception emphasises rights, opportunity, and inclusion, seeking to remediate inequality through reforms. However, it often leaves core power structures intact, aiming for fairer distribution rather than systemic change.

- A radical conception of justice, as articulated by Allen (2014), insists that "justice means creating the conditions for equality by eliminating the structures and conditions of oppression and inequality." This vision demands systemic transformation, addressing the root causes of injustice: capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and other interlocking systems of domination.

## Food sovereignty: a transnational struggle for justice, autonomy, and systemic transformation

While food justice has often been rooted in urban, community-based movements, particularly in the Global North, food sovereignty has a different genealogy (Edelman et al, 2014). It is grounded in rural, agrarian, and Indigenous struggles, and was formally articulated by La Vía Campesina (LVC), a transnational alliance of peasants, Indigenous peoples, landless workers, and small-scale food producers. Foundedin1993, LVC now represents over 200 million people across more than 80 countries, uniting diverse movements across the Global South and North in a shared resistance to the neoliberal, corporate-led model of agriculture.

Food sovereignty is both a critique of the global food system and a radical alternative. It challenges the dominant paradigm of food security, which focuses narrowly on production and distribution, and instead centres questions of power and democracy: What food is produced? Where, how, by whom, and at what scale? Who controls distribution and consumption?

Initially framed as the right of nations to define their food systems, food sovereignty has evolved to reflect the rights of peoples, including Indigenous communities, fisherfolk, pastoralists, and forest dwellers. This shift reflects the movement's

commitment to pluralism, inclusivity, and intersectionality, and its recognition that sovereignty must be decentralised, participatory, and rooted in local knowledge and ecologies. Moreover, more recently it has progressed to explicitly include the ambition of tackling opressions related to class, race, gender, age, among others, and build a society free of social relations of domination.

The movement's vision is articulated through six foundational pillars: food for people, not for profit; valuing food providers, especially small-scale and Indigenous producers; localising food systems to reduce dependency and ecological harm; democratic control over food policy and production; building knowledge and skills through agroecology and horizontal learning; working with nature, not against it (LVC, 2007).

Food sovereignty is grounded in a radical conception of justice. It seeks not merely to redistribute resources but to dismantle the structural inequalities embedded intheglobal food regime. It rejects market-based and individualised solutions, recognising the limits of consumer choice, localism, and ethical branding. Instead, it calls for collective political action, through a combination of grassroots alternatives, social mobilisation, policy advocacy, and structural transformation (Desmarais, 2007).

Despite its transformative vision, food sovereignty is not without contradictions. One of the most debated issues is the role of the state (Edelman et al, 2014). While the movement uses a rights-based language to demand recognition and protection, many states are themselves products of colonial and hierarchical structures, raising questions about their legitimacy as guarantors of justice (Peña, 2005). In some countries, food sovereignty has been enshrined in constitutions and legal frameworks, but implementation often remains symbolic or contradictory (McKay et al., 2014; Giunta, 2014; Schiavoni, 2015; Clark, 2016).

All of this reflects a broader tension between state authority and grassroots autonomy. McKay et al. (2014, p. 1175) argue that food sovereignty embodies "a contradictory notion of sovereignty, requiring simultaneously a strong developmentalist state and the redistribution of power to facilitate direct control over food systems

in ways that may threaten the state". This is consistent with McMichael's (2009) and Patel's (2009) argument that "multiple and competing sovereignties" exist in food sovereignty: whereas the state is called to be a guarantor of rights, the "right of peoples" also calls for advancing alternative forms of democratic organisation beyond the modern state. These "external" and "internal" dimensions of food sovereignty are not irreconcilable, but "how to navigate them is a major question" (Shattuck et al., 2015, p. 425).

Shattuck et al. (2015) call for a relational approach to sovereignty that goes beyond views of food sovereignty as being either "of the state" or "of peoples/communities". Inspired by Gramsci's notion of the integral state, they underline that sovereignty is not just a legal or territorial claim; it is a social relation, which is negotiated, contested, and co-constructed across multiple arenas: state institutions, markets, cultural narratives, civil society, and everyday practices. This perspective helps activists and scholars to focus on the terrain of struggle, attending to the concrete social relations that produce inequality and the mechanisms through which power is structured, experienced, and contested within specific contexts, with the aim of transforming them. It also supports the development of multi-scalar strategies that engage both grassroots and institutional levels, without collapsing one into the other. As a result, food sovereignty is not a one-size-fits-all model.

However, an important point emphasised by both scholars and LVC, is the relevance of building alliances across differences. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) argue that "the nature and extent of reform or transformation possible" depends on the convergence of progressive food movements with the radical camp, and that these must be based on non-instrumental alliances. Although cross-class alliances are needed, they sustain that "linking the livelihood interests (production and reproduction) of underserved communities in the North with those of the besieged peasantry in the Global South probably offers much stronger foundations for a more durable convergence" (ibid., 136). Only through this "unity in diversity" is it possible to force "the state for the implementation of re-distributive land reform, so-

cial protections and safety nets", while seeking to "challenge and transcend the state"(ibid., 129).

LVC exemplifies the strategic potential of movement- and alliance-building in food struggles. Through its decentralised, bottom-up organising model, LVC facilitates the sharing of strategies and experiences across diverse contexts, amplifies grassroots voices in global policy forums, and resists the fragmentation often causedbyneoliberalism. It coordinates resistance to harmful trade regimes and corporate control over seeds, land, and water, while simultaneously advancing agroecology, land reform, and democratic food policy rooted in local knowledge.

Importantly, LVC centres grassroots leadership, ensuring that local struggles are connected to a global vision without being subsumed by it. Its emphasis on feminist, Indigenous, and youth leadership reflects a commitment to intersectionalityandtransformative justice. In doing so, food sovereignty becomes not just a critique of the current system, but a framework for reimagining society itself.

Ultimately, food sovereignty links food systems to broader struggles for climate justice, racial and gender justice, economic democracy, and anti-colonial resistance. By forging alliances with labour unions, environmental collectives, feminist movements, and anti-capitalist organisations, it builds a broad front against the interwoven systems of oppression that shape our world (Desmarais et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

This chapter has situated food as a lens through which we can understandandtransform the broad exploitative and oppressive systems that shape our lives. From the colonial legacies embedded in land ownership to the capitalist logic driving industrial agriculture, food systems reflect and reproduce the structural inequalities of our world. Yet, they also offer a strategic site for resistance, (re)imagination, and social change.

In discussing food activism, this chapter has highlighted the importance of attending to context, contingency, and micro-po-

litics, moving beyond analytical and normative silos between prefigurative and contentious politics frameworks. While prefigurative politics emphasises the lived experience of struggle and the everyday as a site of political action, offering a nuanced understanding of "the political", contentious politics stresses the necessity of collective action and social mobilisation to confront dominant power structures. Bridging these perspectives together allows for a more complex view of power, both imposed from above and negotiated/contested from below, where the everyday intersects with ideals and material realities within structural constraints. It is through this convergence that we can begintoconceptualise radical subjectivities and envision the collective enactment of transformative change.

By examining a range of food movements, from food alternatives to food justice and food sovereignty, this chapter deepens the analysis of strategies for social change. Approaches that focus on building difference and expanding "cracks" in the system, without directly challenging dominant structures such as capitalist markets, neoliberal ideologies, and the state, risk reinforcing structural injustices or leaving those untoched. Even within a social justice framework, neglecting these power structures may result in merely mitigating harm rather than enabling transformation. Advancing equity, autonomy, and self-determination requires centring issues of power and democracy through a plurality of strategic actions, adapted to context and contingency: these include a combination of grassroots alternatives, social mobilisation, policy advocacy, and structural change. This is exemplified by La Vía Campesina's notion of "sovereignty," which reflects a movement- and alliance-building practice that fosters solidarity, amplifies diverse voices, and resists fragmentation, without back sliding local knowledges and leaderships. These alliances are not just tactical but expressions of collective power aimed at driving systemic transformation in the food system, and beyond.

In a context of convergence of rising extractivism, authoritarianism, austerity, and climate breakdown, this chapter argues that food is a vital site of struggle. Beyond resisting deepening

exploitation and deteriorating living conditions, food initiatives and movements can foster solidarity among subaltern and marginalised groups, departing from the everyday. These efforts are essential for making survival possible, while radicalising subjectivites and mobilising collective action to confront dominant powers, laying the groundwork for a more just and sovereign food future.

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Lau Kin Chi[1] and Sit Tsui[2]

# Surviving Through Community Building in Catastrophic Times[3]

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the world has been mired deeper and deeper in massive crises of ecological conditions, economic breakdown, and never-ending pandemics, affecting all, but particularly those made vulnerable by inequalities and injustice. Global media attention is mainly focused on geopolitical shifts, economic restructuring, escalating inflation, and hunger. Anxieties about economic collapse take precedence over climate collapse. Peace talks, discourse of being back to "normal," and economic recovery overshadow the starkest and bleakest ecological warnings by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report. While we are currently anticipating global warming between 1.5°C and 3.2°C, we already find ourselves in unprecedented times: In March 2022, Antarctic areas reached 40°C above normal and North Pole regions hit 30°C above usual levels.[4]

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[3]   This contribution has been originally published in the Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine and Press. Available on: https://monthlyreview.org/articles/surviving-through-community-building-in-catastrophic-times/#en12

[4]   Fiona Harvey, "Heatwaves at Both of Earth's Poles Alarm Climate Scientists," Guardian, March 20, 2022.

# Development Paradox

The case of China illustrates the development paradox. After a century of aggression by imperialist powers, China, mobilizing its material and human resources on a continental scale, has apparently "succeeded" in building its industrial base, largely using rural resources in the first three decades, and in catching up with "global citizenship" since the reform era. Its "success" in the development of its economy and enhancement of people's living standards is, however, wrought with contradictions, especially in the areas of environmental contamination, financialization, and fresh water and energy supplies, posing serious challenges to China's sustainability.

Faced with critiques of China's contributions to global warming, with China's carbon dioxide emissions as an often-quoted reprimand, and with the urgent need to clean up pollution and restore ecological balance, China has begun serious efforts to redress environmental issues in the last twenty years, with some remarkable outcomes.

In October 2021, at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming, under the theme of "Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth," Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, recognized China's work in reducing pollution, restoring degraded land, conserving species and ecosystems, and tackling poverty. She proposed that China's ecological red line program could be applied to Southeast Asia with the Belt and Road Initiative to help countries meet their post-2020 targets.[5] China's proposal, "Drawing a 'Red Line' for Ecological Protection to Mitigate and Adapt to Climate Change: Nature-Based Solution Initiative," has been selected by the United Nations as one of the fifteen best nature-based solutions around the globe. The program identifies China's crucial ecological zones and enforces strict protection in those areas.

In 2007, at the seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, an orientation toward creating an "ecological

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[5] Zhang Hui and Xu Liuliu, "China's Ecological Red Line System, BRI to Help Countries Achieve Post-2020 Targets," *Global Times*, October 11, 2021.

civilization" was formulated. In October 2021, China released *Responding to Climate Change: China's Policies and Actions*, stating that "China will implement its new development philosophy and create a new development dynamic to boost high-quality development.… It will promote a comprehensive transition to green and low-carbon economic and social development, bring a fundamental change to its eco-environment by accumulating small changes, and achieve a model of modernization in which humanity and nature exist harmoniously."[6]

"A new development philosophy" and "a model of modernization" call for remedial measures within a development paradox associated with the double exploitation of humanity and nature. In the international division of labor, China has played the role of "world factory" in the last four decades. Accused of being the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, China has steadily reduced the intensity of its carbon emissions and reinforced the effort to achieve its nationally determined contributions to combating climate change. In September 2020, president Xi Jinping pledged at the UN General Assembly that China would aim to have its carbon dioxide emissions peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060. Other pledges include having renewable energy sources account for 25 percent of total energy consumption, installing enough solar and wind power generators for a combined capacity of 1.2 billion kilowatts, and boosting forest coverage by around six billion cubic meters—all by 2030.[7]

China also pledged to make efforts to reverse the rapid growth of its carbon dioxide emissions. From 2005 to 2020, there was a drop in carbon intensity, totaling a reduction of about 5.8 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions. The average coal consumption of thermal power plants also decreased to 305.8 grams of standard coal per kilowatt hour, a reduction of 370 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions by coal-fired power generation units in 2020 compared to 2010.

6    "Responding to Climate Change: China's Policies and Actions," State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, October 27, 2021.

7    "Responding to Climate Change."

It should be noted that China's moves to remedy the energy issue is combined with its poverty-alleviation efforts, coupling energy measures with provision of social benefits. China has built more than 26 million kilowatts of photovoltaic power stations and thousands of "sunshine banks" in poor rural areas, benefiting about 60,000 poor villages and 4.15 million poor households. Its installed capacity for new energy storage stood at 3.3 million kilowatts, the largest in the world.[8] Hence, as a policy taken up by the state, economic concerns can be combined with social equity pursuits. China is the first developing country to realize the UN Millennium Development Goals by reducing the number of poor people by 50 percent and eliminating extreme poverty in 2020. More than 800 million rural people have been lifted out of destitution.

One might think the pandemic, despite its disruption of global economic activities and its toll on human lives, would at least help alleviate the dire ecological crisis. Yet, economic concerns remain paramount. *The Global Carbon Budget 2021 Report*, released in November 2021, stated that global carbon dioxide emissions fell by 5.4 percent in 2020 due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rose by about 4.9 percent in 2021 to 36.4 billion tons, bringing emissions almost back to 2019 levels. The promise of a post-pandemic "green recovery" has unfortunately not come true.

The global division of labor and China's state policies, manifested in its foreign policies of trade, are important, but the country remains trapped in the development dilemma and still faces the challenge of green recovery. In the midst of the grave challenges of climate collapse, the agents of change need to be grassroots communities, who can lead a general overhaul of mainstream values and cultures based on developmentalism. Resistance to globalization can be seen in places where the logic of modernization is fraught with tensions and adverse consequences. It is in looking into and learning from alternative grassroots practices that we can create a radical paradigm shift.

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[8] "Responding to Climate Change."

# Visions and Actions from the Margins

Taking a subaltern perspective, we find practices of confronting climate collapse and ecological disasters in China among the Chinese people. We propose that ecology take precedence over economy, agriculture over industry and finance, and life over money and profit.

There are always local initiatives showing possibilities for the collective use of resources and people's voluntary participation in social life. They result from people's efforts to find solutions to problems created by the imposition of directives and organization from above according to objectives of modernization in competition with the West. These local initiatives contain elements of the traditions of rural communities. It is these elements, rooted in people's knowledge and practice, that can constitute the resistance to becoming completely engulfed by globalization. They can lead to openings for alternatives by engaging with everyday life, reviving such elements in different contexts. The innovative moves of the people are neither traditional nor modern, but contemporary—and we must learn how to grasp the spontaneity and creativity of these resistances. People think on their own feet, grasping the very situations in which they are thrown and coming up with answers to the very reality posed to them.

To mitigate the adverse effects of globalization with capital flow and labor migration, we must return to *localization, re-communalization, and re-ruralization*. The alternative path goes for small peasantry, ecological agriculture, self-sufficiency, and community regeneration. We must continue to defend food sovereignty and to explore local plans for water and energy. They should be small-scale and not spectacular mega projects. Small is beautiful as well as powerful.

For the past twenty years, we have actively engaged in the new rural reconstruction movement in China and the PeaceWomen Across the Globe campaign. As a response to the problems caused by industrialization and modernization in a developing country such as China, rural reconstruction has been designed as a

political and cultural project to defend peasant communities and agriculture. These grassroots efforts are separate from, parallel to, and sometimes in tension with projects initiated by the state. As an attempt to construct a platform for direct democracy and to experiment with participatory, urban-rural integration for sustainability, the Chinese model of rural reconstruction may help build a politics for alternative modernization. Another initiative, 1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005, was launched in 2003 as a way to make the thoughts and practice of subaltern women more widely known. A call went out across the globe and an international committee of twenty women from all continents was formed. After selection and documentation, one thousand women from over 150 countries were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

We have witnessed many grassroots people mobilize their communities to tackle ecological degradation and strive for self-sufficiency with dignity. As organic intellectuals, we work to make these efforts not only heard and visible, but also to help connect them with one another. Three peacewomen stories will be narrated here as examples of how local women have devoted themselves to social, cultural, and ecological experiments: Yin Yuzhen and her family deploy localized knowledge to deal with water shortages and desertification, and to sustain afforestation in northwest China; Yun Jianli and her volunteer team bridge the gap between rural and urban communities to negotiate with the South-North Water Diversion Project and overcome water pollution and bureaucracy in central China; and Wang Pinsong and her community fought against the dam building project at Tiger Leap Gorge in southwest China to protect their home villages for future generations. Their stories inform how we can equip ourselves with survival strategies in catastrophic times.

# Yin Yuzhen: People's Science in Greening the Desert

In China, persistent efforts to address environmental issues have come from both above and below. China has taken various measures to build the carbon sink capacity of ecosystems and ensure that forests, grasslands, wetlands, oceans, soil, and frigid zones play their role in carbon sequestration. China has the highest growth in forest coverage and the largest area of artificial forests.

At the end of 2020, China's forest area stood at 220 million hectares, its forest coverage reached 23 percent, and forest carbon storage approached 9.19 billion tons.[9] From 2016 to 2020, China conducted desertification control on almost eleven million hectares, addressed desertification on 1.65 million hectares, and applied comprehensive treatment of soil erosion to an additional 310,000 square kilometers of land. Saihanba and Kubuqi are two shining examples of the "desert to oasis" miracle. The Saihanba forestation project, the world's largest artificial plantation, named "the Green Lung of north China," won the 2021 Land for Life Award by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Previously, Saihanba won the Champions of the Earth award by the UN Environment Programme in 2017.[10]

According to NASA research, the global green leaf area has increased by 5 percent from 2000 to 2017. China and India account for one third of the greening but only 9 percent of the planet's land area covered in vegetation. "China alone accounts for twenty-five percent of the global net increase in leaf area with only 6.6 percent of global vegetated area. The greening in China is from forests (42 percent) and croplands (32 percent), but in India is mostly from croplands (82 percent) with minor contribution from forests (4.4 percent)."[11] In addition to official programs of mitigating land de-

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9    "Responding to Climate Change."

10   "Saihanba Forest Farm Wins UN Pact's Land for Life Award in China," CGTN, September 30, 2021; "Saihanba Afforestation Community—Inspiration and Action," Champions of the Earth, UN Environment Programme, accessed May 25, 2022.

11   Chi Chen et al., "China and India Lead in Greening of the World Through Land-Use

gradation, air pollution, and climate change, we have identified grassroots people's initiatives and outstanding contributions.

Yin Yuzhen is a simple peasant woman, but she also became a people's scientist through years of self-learning in the desert. In 1985, as a 20-year-old woman from Shaanxi Province, Yin married and moved into the interior of Mu Us Desert in Inner Mongolia to an area named Jingbei Tang in Uxin Banner. The adverse natural conditions were unimaginable, and sand was present everywhere. All that they saw, touched, stepped on, at home or outside, was sand. The wind blew sand grains into their nostrils, ears, and mouths; when the storm stopped, the deadly silence was haunting—only Yin and her husband lived in that area. Confronted by the arduousness of her conditions, she made up her mind to start planting trees. Yin began to dig irrigation ditches for water. Sadly, sandstorms destroyed the ditches. In the winter, she bundled sunflower stems to prevent the wind from destroying them. The following spring, she dug ditches, planting five thousand willow trees. Unfortunately, the sand grains again destroyed her efforts. It took a long time, but one day dew came, then rain (not strong nor often, but visibly)—then bees, birds, and butterflies followed.

Having worked hard for thirty-seven years, Yin and her family have planted five hundred thousand trees, thus creating countless oases of bushes and trees on an area of forty-seven square kilometers. She has planted more than one hundred different bush and tree species and learned which ones grew best. On average, Yin plants more than thirty thousand poplars, digs two hundred thousand holes for willows, and grows four hundred thousand poplar firewood and purple locusts every year. Through trial and error, with many tormenting failures, she has developed an incredible landscape for her habitat and adapted to the vicissitudes of nature in her location, discovering how to make sure certain species survive at specific times of the year, thus developing her unique ways of forestation.

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Management," Nature Sustainability 2 (2019): 122–29; "China and India Lead the Way in Greening," NASA Earth Observatory, accessed May 25, 2022; "Human Activity in China and India Dominates the Greening of the Earth, NASA Study Shows," NASA, February 11, 2019.

In the meantime, she is known far beyond Inner Mongolia as a respected expert in greening deserts. We invited Yin to attend local and international workshops and seminars to exchange experiences of recovering and restoring degraded landscapes. In 2015, we organized a field trip to visit Yin's home, and found that her family grew potatoes, corn, carrots, watermelons, and grapes, and raised sheep and chickens.

Since 2013, she has built an ecological tourism center. She has won over sixty awards at home and abroad, such as the Ida Somazzi Prize for outstanding merits for peace and human rights in 2013 in Switzerland. In 2015, she was selected as one of Ten Persons of the Year of Devotion to Homeland by the China Devotion to Homeland Cultural Development Association. Inspired by Yin's afforestation work, peasants and herdspeople in the vicinity become involved in afforestation. The forest coverage rate reached 32.3 percent in Uxin Banner, and nearly 6,700 square kilometers of barren sand were turned green. We have produced a documentary about her.[12]

China launched the Three-North Shelterbelt Forest Program in 1978 as an anti-desertification effort, consisting of forestation in northern China. The State Forestry Administration data showed that the forest coverage in the treated areas had increased from 5.05 percent in 1977 to 12.4 percent at the end of 2012. This is attributed to the hard work of people like Yin, who do not lose heart, but just act—simple acts, prior to government acts. Never discouraged by failure, she has not only improved her living conditions and changed her fate but also motivated many peasants and herdspeople to join her in afforesting the desert. This is how Yin is praised by her community: "She is the epitome of courage, patience and perseverance. Her work in greening the desert commands universal respect."

Yin once remarked, "I would rather die of fatigue from fighting the sand than be bullied by the sand and wind." In her eyes, sandstorms are her enemy more than the bureaucracy that failed

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[12] "PeaceWomen Across the Globe," Global University, accessed May 25, 2022.

to resolve the problem. Even though local authorities distributed some seedlings to peasant households, the local population was initially reluctant to take the matters into their own hands. But Yin, an illiterate peasant, mapped the local resources and collected the unwanted seedlings from other villagers. She refused to move to more livable areas and was determined to take root in a desert. Seeking expert advice, with various other resources, she has developed a local and people-centered approach for effective sand area restoration. She not only produces local knowledge for basic livelihood, but also develops people's science on soil, water, forest, and food, necessary for communal survival. Her story demonstrates how a simple village woman, as a persistent self--learner and food grower, can succeed in confronting the unpredictable climate. She has amazed the public with her stamina, persistence, and innovation.

## Yun Jianli: Voluntarism to Decontaminate the Han River

In the spring of 2000, Yun Jianli, a former high school teacher, was shocked to see that there was an outfall along the Han River in Hubei Province, into which gray-black sewage was being discharged directly. Her friend commented that it was not too bad when compared to the truly dirty Zaoyang River. To see for herself, Yun organized a field trip. She was absolutely stunned to see that the water was terribly smelly, colored like soy sauce, and foaming. She thought: "This filthy water mixed with the Han River directly destroys the water quality. Will it not damage Xiangfan City people's health in the long run? If we do not stop it, how can we face future generations?"

Rapid industrialization and urbanization for decades have led to worsening pollution. The Environmental Protection Law was formally promulgated in China in late 1989 after it was introduced on a trial basis a decade earlier. These laws tended to be vague in their definitions and provisions and were often ignored. Penalties stated in the laws were criticized as being

too lenient to effectively enforce pollution control. Many low-technology and high-waste-producing factories moved to China because of its low penalties on environmental pollution.[13]

In the 1990s, two decades into the reform period, local small and medium enterprises were encouraged to take up production, offering employment and the bases for China's light industries to take off, and pollution became acute. The consequence was that over half of China's rivers were polluted. In the seven major rivers, over 80 percent of water was polluted. In Beijing, over 70 percent of rivers and tributaries were polluted. Industrial waste, sewage, and used water from irrigation were the main sources of water pollution in the country. The main rivers and their tributaries were estimated to be receiving about 70 percent of China's wastewater, with 41 percent received by the Yangtze River alone. An official survey in 1990 showed that sixty-five out of the ninety-four rivers investigated were polluted to different extents. It was estimated that 45,000 metric tons of wastewater was poured into rivers and lakes every year, of which only about 30 percent was treated. Even so, over 40 percent of the treatment was below standard. In Guangdong Province, of forty-seven major cities, forty-three had polluted underground water. About 70 percent of wastewater was industrial waste. China produced more wastewater per unit of product than other industrialized countries. Small lakes near large industrial areas were particularly polluted. For example, a lake in Hubei Province was found to contain 1,670 tons of wastewater per 100,000 cubic meters.[14]

According to the latest statistics, in 2020 the combined proportion of state-controlled water sections with good-quality surface water increased to 83.4 percent (the target was 70 percent). The proportion of water sections with bad quality surface water below grade V decreased to 0.6 percent (the

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[13] Lau Kin Chi et al., "China," in The Dispossessed: Victims of Development in Asia (Hong Kong: Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives, 1997), 33–34.

[14] Lau et al., "China."

target was 5 percent).[15] Threatened by polluted water and environmental degradation, local people like Yun took initiatives to deal with the urgency of survival through voluntarism and rural-urban community mobilization.

In 2002, Yun turned 69 years old and experienced a turning point in her life. She founded Green Han River, an environmental protection organization, to tackle water pollution in her hometown. She has put tremendous effort into raising public awareness and concern in Xiangfan City. As a result, the water quality of the Han River, the source of China's south-north water diversion project, has improved.

When she first began to engage with the green movement, people's awareness of environmental issues was minimal. Many failed to understand her; others thought she was insane. Governmental officials thought she was too nosy, while factory owners were hostile. Yun visited villages, factories, and mountain areas along the Han River to investigate the sources of pollution. She wrote over one hundred investigative reports and proposals, such as "Han River Xiangfan Water Pollution Investigation Report," "Domestic Sewage Treatment is Urgent," "Air Quality in Urban Areas Is Worrying," "Don't Turn Industrial Parks into Pollution Sources," "Regulate Ginger Processing Enterprises as Soon as Possible to Prevent Another Major Source of Pollution Spreading," among others.

The association currently has 81 organizational members, 180 individual members, and more than 30,000 volunteers. Among them are former officials, retired teachers, senior engineers, bureaucrats, private entrepreneurs, and journalists. The volunteer team has become larger and larger, with members' ages ranging from kindergarten age to over 80 years old. Team members are volunteers and work is self-financed. For example, in 2006, in order to contribute to the safe drinking water project for Zhaiwan villagers along the Tangbai River, the team went to the village more than forty times, bringing their own food and spending the night in a tent, without adding any burden to the villagers. They always stay at the cheapest hotels in urban areas.

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15    "Responding to Climate Change."

They uphold the principle of self-financing as well as the spirit of mutual help between the city and the countryside.

Green Han River has held forty free environmental education training courses, in which over two thousand teachers from over a thousand schools and units, and environmental volunteers from various fronts, have participated. Environmental education has been introduced on campus, in rural areas, institutions, communities, and enterprises almost a thousand times, with face-to-face presentations and photo exhibitions for more than 530,000 people. By 2018, they had organized over a thousand fieldtrips to investigate pollution sources along the Han River and its tributaries, traveling more than 100,000 kilometers.

Yun is often referred to as "Sister Yun of Environmental Protection" and children call her "Environmental Protection Granny," a name that pays tribute to her care of nature as well as of next generations. "To protect a river is a huge project, relying only on the power of environmental protection volunteers is not enough, we cannot stay to monitor the river every day," commented Yun. "Only by mobilizing the people along the river to protect their own rivers, there is hope; only by mobilizing the whole society to participate, there is hope for the future of the ecological movement."

Her story shows the vitality of local movements that, rather than adopting an antagonistic attitude, work with government and enterprises, despite not always being welcomed by interest blocs. She also demonstrates how to educate, persuade, and mobilize the general public, both in rural and urban areas, to identify with the care of "mother river" through volunteer work. This kind of identification and voluntarism shows that ecology takes precedence over economy, and communal well-being takes precedence over money and profit. Yun was an educated youth who went to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Her endeavors of popular mobilization for the common good sustain the collaborative legacies of intellectuals, peasants, and workers.

# Wang Pinsong: All Ethnicities for the Rural Commons

The story of Wang Pinsong (1924–2009) and her community is an inspiring example of efforts to counter the forces of modernization. She was old but not frail, widowed but not solitary, marked by the hard lines of life but not miserable or plaintive. Hope was generously on offer from her.

In 1924, Wang was born in Shangri-La by the Gold Sand River in southwest China, which has been inhabited by over fifteen ethnic groups for generations and generations (Wang's family alone is composed of five ethnicities). Wang was of Bai ethnicity, her husband Han, her daughter-in-law Naxi, and her granddaughters-in-law Pumi and Hui. The many ethnic groups celebrate their histories with rich Indigenous traditions and rituals, with a particular respect for nature. The name Pinsong, for example, means "character of the pine tree"—integrity and uprightness. Wang lived all her life in Shangri-La. On finishing primary school, she ran away from home, walked three days to town to sit for an examination for a regular school, and received the second-highest score, but her family refused to let her study because she was a girl. She taught arithmetic for one year in a primary school, becoming the first woman teacher in the region. At 19, she got married. The tradition in her region was that men busied themselves with art—such as music, calligraphy, painting, and poetry—while women were left with all the labor at home and in the fields. Wang's husband was often away from home, and he returned to Shangri-La as the first Communist Party member in the village.

Wang had been revered in the village for her capability, generosity, and optimism. As a midwife, she had welcomed three generations into the world. Wang was addressed intimately by all as "grandma," and was respected and loved for her dedication and simplicity. The sense of community in the region has always been strong. With so many ethnic groups living in the village, a culture of mutual respect has prevailed.

In the region, people relate to one another in a special way. Those born in the same year, regardless of race, ethnicity, or clan, relate to each other as "kin of the same root" and remain friends throughout their lives. All their relationships are extended, so that the father, mother, brother, and cousin of a "root kin" are one's own "root" father, mother, brother, and cousin as well. Hence, all families in the village are related in one way or another, becoming one big family. A special respect for difference and diversity is unique in this rural region by the beautiful river.

With such bonds of intimacy in the village, it is not surprising that the villagers were united in their resistance against the dam-building project at the Tiger Leap Gorge. If the dam were built, one hundred thousand villagers would be displaced, thirty-three thousand acres of fertile land by the riverbanks would be submerged, and the diverse cultures of this region destroyed along with it. The villagers responded to the developers soliciting the conditions under which they would sell the land: "There is no condition; our land is not for sale; our land is priceless; our land is our very dear life; we are not giving it up; if it will be so, let us be submerged with our land." Over 90 percent of the villagers signed a statement to refuse any offer or bribe from developers. In December 2005, on a freezing night, beside a campfire, we heard the local people sing:

> Of beauty and calm is Gold Sand River,
> now put at stake at developers' hand;
> we compatriots and natives here,
> arm in arm, defend our land.
> Of beauty and calm is our native land,
> the solidarity of all ethnicities
> makes a bond
> for us to defend Gold Sand land.
> The land is invaluable treasure for us peasants,
> tons of gold cannot part us from our land.

The deep involvement of the villagers with one another in their daily lives and in their actions against the dam is something

like second nature to them, a nature grounded in their ties to, and their care for, the soil, the mountains, the water, the plants, and the people that constitute their world. The diversity of nature nurtures them as they oblige themselves to nurture the diversity of nature in return. Hence, like nature, they are open to diversity and difference, the critical life force of all sustainable relations of peace.

Wang had lived through the most tumultuous years of the twentieth century and experienced the many ups and downs on the ground. Amid the turmoil of war and revolution, amid the aspirations for peace and freedom, she had lived with her personal pains and losses. She had suffered the traumatic loss of her eldest grandson, Xiao Liangzhong (1972–2005), who died a premature death from exhaustion and heart attack in the course of fighting against the building of the Tiger Leap Gorge dam. Xiao was an anthropologist from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He mobilized his colleagues and friends in Beijing to join the campaign to suspend the dam project.

On the level of affect, Wang was inspiring in her practices. She showed us the potentialities of the politics of becoming, a politics characterized by openness. Wang was open to a quiet passion for life, a reticent intimacy with her community, a furious tenderness for the land, a tender fury against injustice and exploitation, and an uncertain living in the present, with hope. It is an affirmation of life that allows one to immerse oneself in it, opening up to the capacity to affect and be affected. In the face of the daily forces of marginalization churned out by institutional violences—political, economic, and legal—as well as cultural violences along axes of ethnicity and gender, the practices of Wang and many women of her generation exhibit ingenuity and determination in their unyielding efforts to inhabit the margins. They show us how to imagine peace without succumbing to the institutional and cultural violences that dominate the understanding of peace. They show us that peace is not an end to be achieved by people vying for the center of control. They show us that peace is a pedagogical process here and now in our daily lives, a process through which we continuously learn to live with

differences and diversities in relating to one another and to nature, with the readiness to be responsive. It is a process through which difference, rather than being threatening and in need of eradication, nourishes and enriches us.

The building of a dam at the Tiger Leap Gorge was suspended. However, nowadays there are construction projects of national parks and dams in other parts along the Gold Sand River. On the graveyard of Xiao Liangzhong, there is a written scripture: *The Son of Gold Sand River.* His mother remarked, "I lost my son, but the Gold Sand River is preserved." The villagers from different ethnicities sustain the legacies of the anti-dam movement: "The great river at our doorstep is a resource, and no one has the right to destroy her. We have to hand over this great river to our children from generation to generation." The many ethnic groups take roots and make a bond through the Gold Sand River. They not only defend small peasant agriculture on their ancestral land, but also preserve rural communities along the mother river, with the characteristics of self-sufficiency and self-governance.

## Toward Ecological Communism

Here, it would be useful to revisit Samir Amin's advocacy of delinking by countries on the periphery and the semi-periphery. As Amin explained, delinking refers to "the organization of a system of criteria for the rationality of economic choices based on a law of value, which has a national foundation and a popular content, independent of the criteria of economic rationality that emerges from the domination of the law of capitalist value that operates on a world scale."[16] The delinking strategy implies a steering away from the global division of labor that favors the developed West, detrimental to the resource and currency sovereignty of countries at the periphery and semi-periphery. In this long struggle for a paradigm shift, the state, with popular support, should take an autonomous path in prioritizing the needs of its sovereignty and the people's livelihood instead of accepting impositions by the global imperialist hegemons.

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[16] Samir Amin, "A Note on the Concept of Delinking," Review (Fernand Braudel Center) 10, no. 3 (1987): 435–44.

China has charted a path of twists and turns in its delinking and relinking strategies as against the hegemonic West. In its first twenty years, new China was subject to isolation and hostilities, first by the U.S. camp and then by the Soviet camp. For about a decade, before China reconciled with the United States and rejoined the United Nations in 1971, China was obliged to seek development within its own borders and thereby achieved some degree of delinking, which was presented as embarking on a road of self-reliance. This was more the result of necessity than of choice. The reform of 1978 was a reaction to the challenge of globalization but it was not necessarily resistance against the essence of globalization according to capitalist values. The dream of modernizing China, of countering imperialist domination and occupation, has been based for over a century on China's drive to emulate its rivals: hence the slogan of the 1910s of acquiring science and democracy, the slogan of the 1950s of catching up with Britain and the United States, and the recent slogan of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

China has struggled with the predicaments and consequences of the development trap: environmental degradation, rural-urban inequalities, and an enlarging gap between the rich and the poor. That is the background to the state policies of "ecological civilization," "new socialist rural reconstruction," "dual circulation," "rural revitalization," and "common prosperity." These policies signify a necessary and positive turn toward internal circulation and balancing the gaps between the coastal and hinterland regions, between the rural and the urban, and reducing class and social polarizations.

Paradoxically, the state plays, on the one hand, the role of an engine for modernization, which is by essence exploitative, destructive, and unjust. On the other hand, the state acts as a regulator addressing internal demands and securing basic livelihood for the majority. This can be shown in the accomplishment of the elimination of extreme poverty, as well as the application of "putting people and life first," such as through free vaccination and medical treatment for all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These endeavors contradict the logic of capitalism that treats the poor, weak, sick, and dying as disposable. In this sense, the state is capable of rejecting a capitalist logic and also of mobilizing social engagement for the common good.

The most challenging issue is that four decades of open-door reform have essentially placed China under the rules and regulations of the global economy dominated by the hegemony of the United States and the developed West. Following the logic of globalization, interest blocs in different facets of China's economic, political, social, and cultural life have formed and consolidated themselves, with an obsession on economic growth and monetary profits. Meanwhile, in cultural terms, the advocacy of self-interest and social Darwinism and the reduction of human relationships to monetary ones, which have been legitimized and promoted since the reform, are but the more flagrant emulation of the values and cultures of modernization. In this march toward modernization, and with the general disintegration of rural communities, what is sidelined are the values of traditional cultures that hold communities together: giving, reciprocity, tolerance, resilience, mutual aid, collectivity, and sustainability.

Thus, rather than relying on a benevolent state or a good-willed leadership to navigate away from the development trap, people on the ground are becoming more and more aware of their need to play a part in reversing the suicidal trend globalization imposes on them—that is, the need to rescue themselves from the impacts of development and climate collapse, and nurture values alternative to capitalist greed and self-interest. Thus, it is not just a matter of looking to the state for accountability and implementing policies. Rather, it is necessary to take a bottom-up approach by turning our eyes to the people on the ground and their creative and innovative ways to tackle societal issues, relying on community bonds to carve their common destiny. These humble efforts, as the examples of the three peacewomen show, could easily be dismissed as trivial or insignificant for people obsessed with looking to the state or corporations to take the lead. But it is precisely in recognizing the grassroots people's efforts in their

local specificities that much can be learned about how to deal with the overarching climate collapse we are facing.

The stories of the three peacewomen show that feminist approaches to collective problems can fundamentally challenge the patriarchal power relations that threaten a community's self-sufficiency and autonomy, and that impose the logic of modernization on the diverse trajectories taken by local inhabitants. The people's initiatives to address problems have come before the government policy of adjustment. They do not wait for, are not dependent on, the government to resolve problems. The conversations and mutual learning and support of these local initiatives could be a reference for a national solution, as well as a globalization of people's resistances.

In these catastrophic times, it is urgent to learn how to survive climate collapse. Climate collapse is global, but efforts of mitigation for community survival need to be based on a *locale*, or a bedrock of social transformation. We desperately need to identify and recognize the contributions of intellectuals and activists at the grassroots. The peacewomen demonstrate strong women's leadership in daily struggles, producing local knowledge for family and communal survival, mobilizing volunteers to cherish nature over money, prompting government and business sectors to act, facilitating collaboration between rural and urban communities, and consolidating the commons for people in all their diversity.

Having the will to survive together and learn the know-how of problem-solving may save us, as communities, from the doom of barbarism. This may also contribute to the envisioning and propagation of ecological communism as a radical rejection of the capitalist logic and paradigm, and its devastating consequences on humanity and all species on the planet. "Abundance" envisioned for communism cannot be materially defined, but needs to be ethically restrained, incorporating ecological concerns, and enriched spiritually rather than materially. It is about creating sustainable livelihoods with the commons managed by local communities. Herein lies grassroots people's agency for a radical change of power relations and human-nature relations embodied in the long struggles for re-communalization and re-ruralization.

Lau Kin Chi[1] and Sit Tsui[2]

# Communal Governance and Production in Rural China Today[3]

> *I revere land. Land is an important resource for human survival; historically, we have the God of Land and the God of Grain. Land is a resource inherited from our ancestors' hard work. They want to give their descendants a concrete material base of land resources in the hope that future generations can live on. I dare not take away the happiness and welfare of my descendants just to prioritize my self-interest!*
>
> *— Lu Hanman, former village secretary of the Communist Party of China in Yakou Village*

## The Rise and Fall of the People's Commune

Starting in the 1950s and into the '70s, the People's Commune system played an important part in New China's pursuit of national industrialization, even as the country was under sanctions by the United States and the Soviet Union. The emergence of the People's Commune in 1958 could not be separated from the accomplishment of land reform (1949–1952) and the movement of mutual aid and cooperatization in agricultural production (1952–1957).

The land reform gave birth to hundreds of millions of small land property owners. However, the scattered small peasants gradually realized that it was difficult for any individual family to increase agricultural production. The "Three-Donkey-Legs Poor Cooperative" (三条驴腿穷棒子社) was hailed as a model of peasant cooperation and self-reliance. In October 1952, twenty-three households in Xipu Village, Hebei Province, set up a primary agricultural production cooperative, with only 230 mu (Chinese acre) of land and a "three-leg donkey" as their common property. The "three donkey legs" referred to the three-fourths of the shares given to the twenty-three households. The peasants worked hard together to fetch firewood from the mountains in exchange for carts, oxen, mules, sheep, and small farm tools. They recognized the power of unity, so their membership grew to more than eighty households. In 1956, Xipu and other villages formed the first advanced cooperative, that is, Jianming Agricultural, Forestry, and Animal Husbandry Production Cooperative. In Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside (1957), Mao Zedong highly praised the Three-Donkey-Legs Poor Cooperative as "the image of the whole country."

However, the Communist Party leadership realized that only by organizing cooperatives could it extract surplus value from thousands of small peasants and lay the foundation for national industrialization. In the official discourse, the Communist Party's general line and task in the transitional period to socialism was gradually to realize the socialist industrialization of the country and the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts, and capitalist industry and commerce.

In February 1953, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) formally adopted the Resolution on Mutual Aid and Cooperation in Agricultural Production, and the operation of primary agricultural production cooperatives began on a general trial basis throughout the country. Afterward, the CPC Central Committee put forward a plan to develop agricultural production cooperatives from more than 14,000 to 35,800 from winter 1953 to spring 1954. By the end of 1954, the number of agricultural cooperatives had grown to 100,000. The propor-

tion of peasant households participating in mutual aid groups rose from 10.7 percent in 1950 to 39.9 percent and 58.3 percent in 1952 and 1954, respectively. The share of the cooperative economy in the national economy also rose from 1.5 percent in 1952 to 2.5 percent in 1953 and 4.8 percent in 1954.[4]

In December 1953, the CPC Central Committee adopted the Decision on the Development of Agricultural Production Cooperatives, which called for the full promotion of agricultural production cooperation, supply and marketing cooperation, and credit cooperation as three forms of socialist transformation of the small peasant economy to be carried out simultaneously. By the end of 1955, the number of primary agricultural production cooperatives had grown to 670,000. By the end of 1956, the number of peasants participating in cooperatives had soared to 96.3 percent of all peasants, 87.8 percent of whom were in advanced cooperatives with full collective ownership. In March 1958, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee adopted the Opinion on Appropriately Merging Small Agricultural Cooperatives into Large Cooperatives. The Opinion states: "To meet the needs of agricultural production and the cultural revolution, it is necessary to systematically and appropriately merge small agricultural cooperatives into large cooperatives where conditions exist."

In April 1958, twenty-seven small agricultural cooperatives in four townships of Suiping County, Henan Province, with about 6,500 households and 30,000 people, decided to merge to form a large cooperative, which was renamed the "Chaya Mountain Large Cooperative" (嵖岈山大社). The collective later changed its name to the "Chaya Satellite Collective Farm." In May of the same year, in terms of farm management and distribution form, the scale of the Cooperative was recognized as higher than the Soviet Union's collective farm and the Paris Commune, so it was renamed to Chaya Satellite People's Commune. On July 1, 1958, in the third issue of *Red Flag Magazine*, there was an article titled,

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[4]    National Bureau of Statistics of China, The Great Decade—Statistics on the Economic and Cultural Achievements of the People's Republic of China (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1959).

"A Brand-New Society, A Brand-New People," which proposed "to turn a cooperative into both an agricultural and industrial cooperative grassroots organizational unit, and practically a People's Commune combining agriculture and industry." This was the first time the term "People's Commune" was mentioned in the official press. Later, on September 1, 1958, the seventh issue of *Red Flag Magazine* published "A Brief Introduction to the Chaya Satellite People's Commune in Suiping County, Henan Province."

In 1956, Qiliying (七里营) in Xinxiang County, Henan Province, was designated as a pilot project for agricultural cooperatization, and in July 1958, the twenty-six advanced cooperatives in Qiliying were merged to form the Qiliying Large Cooperative. It was suggested to call it a communist commune because Karl Marx and Frederick Engels had repeatedly spoken of the "Paris Commune." Echoing the articles about communes in the *Red Flag Magazine*, local people thought that "People's Commune" was a good name for it. On August 1, 1958, Qiliying Large Cooperative adopted the name of "Qiliying People's Commune" for the first time in administrative documents. On August 6, Mao Zedong visited Qiliying People's Commune and said: "It seems that 'People's Commune' is a good name, including workers, peasants, soldiers, scholars, and merchants, as well as managing production, life, and power." He also summarized the characteristics of "People's Commune" as "one, it is big (in terms of scale), two, it is public (in terms of public ownership)."

On August 29, 1958, the CPC Central Committee adopted the Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Establishment of People's Communes in Rural Areas. There emerged a people's communalization movement boom. There were more than 740,000 agricultural production cooperatives nationwide that were reorganized into more than 26,000 People's Communes, with 120 million households—or more than 99 percent of the country's total rural population—participating in the communes.[5] China adopted a military-style organization and

[5]   "Circular on the Separation of Government and Society and the Establishment of Township Governments," Communist Party of China News Network, China Reform Information Center, October 12, 1983, reformdata.org.

collectivization of labor and life. Many irrigation and mechanization projects aimed at increasing agricultural production were carried out during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962).

In the next few years, adjustments were made to handle the problems of extreme surplus extraction, exaggeration of results, vanity of high yields, hunger, and disasters. In 1961, the Regulations on the Work of Rural People's Communes were implemented, establishing a three-tiered ownership and responsibility system. The three levels were the commune, the production brigade, and the production team, with the team as the basic unit. Commune members participated in collective production work and were paid according to the work-points they gained. Members could also cultivate a small plot of land for subsistence farming and run a small number of family sideline businesses. The number of People's Communes soon increased from about 24,000 to 74,000 because the scale of a commune was downsized and it also allowed peasants to have relatively reasonable autonomy over family consumption. Later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the People's Communes would become the main rural political organization, with an estimated 74,000–92,000 People's Communes in the countryside.

In August 1963, Dazhai (大寨) Village in Xiyang County, Shanxi Province, suffered a once in a century flood. Relying on the strength of the collective to rebuild their homes, it completed the grain requisition task of 120,000 kilograms ordered from the central government: an average of 1,500 kilograms per household, and 200 kilograms per capita of rations for a villager. In the same year, the peasants transitioned from the basic accounting unit of the production team to the production brigade.[6] It meant a village was upgraded to a higher level of production unit. In 1964, a nationwide "Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture Campaign" was launched.

In 1966, there was a shift of leadership in the CPC. Mao Zedong issued the "May 7 Instruction," calling for "all walks of life throughout the country to become 'one big school' 'learning from

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[6]  Yue Congxin, "The Agricultural Learning from Dazhai Campaign and Its Re-evaluation," Party History and Literature Collection, no.10 (2012).

the world,'" "to learn politics, military affairs, and culture, and to engage in agricultural and sideline production." The "big school" can be interpreted as a metaphor for the People's Commune.[7] Mao had high praise for the Dazhai experience of mass mobilization and self-reliance, and Chen Yonggui—the CPC secretary of Dazhai village—was promoted to be a member of the CPC Politburo from 1969 to 1977 and vice premier of China from 1975 to 1980.

The Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture Campaign lasted for nearly sixteen years. Mechanized agriculture was promoted to increase grain production. Between 1957 and 1980, the total area of land undergoing mechanized cultivation increased by over 15 times, accounting for 42 percent of the total cultivated land. In 1957, there were 544 small hydropower stations for agricultural use nationwide; between 1957 and 1980, the number increased to 79,775, a more than 140-fold increase. The average annual growth rate of grain output between 1962 and 1980 was 4.3 percent. This was higher than both the 3.58 percent increase in the quasi-collectivization period of 1953–1957 and the 1.86 percent increase under the decentralized system of operation of 1981–2001.[8]

Over two decades, forty million educated youth were sent to the countryside in three waves (1968–1969, 1970–1973, 1974–1976), in part to deal with the problem of insufficient employment in the cities.[9] Alongside millions of local peasants, the urban youth sent to People's Communes contributed their labor power to agricultural production, mechanization, and village industrialization.

However, with the Reform of 1978, the Central Government gradually affirmed various forms of household contract responsibility systems that were emerging in the countryside. The system meant that a village committee has land ownership over arable land, housing land, and collective construction land. Meanwhile, a

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[7]   "Mao Zedong issued the 'May 7 Instructions,'" News of the Communist Party of China, n.d., cpc.people.com.cn.

[8]   Old Field, "Discussion of the People's Commune—20 Years after the Dissolution of the People's Commune," March 25, 2021, mzfxw.com.

[9]   Sit Tsui et al., "Rural Communities and Economic Crises in Modern China," Monthly Review 70, no. 4 (September 2018): 35–51.

peasant household has the right to a land contract and the right of land management, as well as the right to access land for housing.

In 1983, the State Council issued the "Circular on the Establishment of Township Governments Separated from Communes" and, by 1985, more than 92,000 townships had been established out of 56,000 People's Communes, and more than 820,000 village committees had been established out of more than 540,000 production brigades, thus practically abolishing the People's Commune as a political institution.[10] It meant that in rural areas the establishment of the township government played an administrative role, meanwhile, villagers' collectives acted as the grassroots self-governance organization of peasant households and had ownership over land property. In other words, the People's Commune, which practiced a system of integrating administrative units with economic entities and a militia, was dissolved.

## The Government's Return to Collectivism

The People's Commune system officially lasted twenty-five years in rural China, and the actual nationwide implementation lasted about seventeen years. This unique form of political and economic organization of peasants, integrated into the state administrative structure, has mostly ceased to exist in the past forty years after the Reform policy was launched.

After adopting the open-door Reform policy, China implemented speedy urbanization and export-oriented industrialization. In parallel, there were also changes in the rural land policies. Since 1983, China has adopted the household responsibility system, which allows an individual peasant household to have the right to land use. Now, in China, there are more than 1.5 billion mu of household contracted farmland, involving nearly 200 million peasant households. The first round of land contracting was from 1983 to 1997, and the second round was began in 1997 and extends to 2027. According to the Nineteenth National Congress

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10  "Circular on the Separation of Government and Society and the Establishment of Township Governments."

of the CPC in 2017, the second round of land contracting will be extended for another thirty years, from 2027 to 2058.[11]

Under the Household Responsibility System, while the village collective by constitution has land ownership, its power of mass mobilizing in terms of control over common property has been weakened. There are complexities and tensions over land rights, both on paper and in reality. In 1993, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council stated that, according to the principle of "great stability and small adjustment," there would be no land redistribution within villages even though there are changes in the population. Yet, the village collective can make small adjustments to land relocation in specific contexts, with the consent of more than two-thirds of the villagers and with the approval of the township government and the county government.

Yang Decai, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, pointed out that the stoppage of land redistribution within villages has led to a gradual increase in the number of new landless population, such as new family members born after 1995, divorced women, and women married to people in other villages. His research found that new landless peasants in some villages accounted for nearly one quarter of the total population in the villages.[12]

Another question is the phenomenon of private land use transfers, which is prone to conflicts and disputes. Early in 1988, the National People's Congress amended the constitution with provisions that the right of land use can be legally transferred. In 2016, the State Council issued a document on the separation of rural land rights: land ownership, contracting rights, and operation rights. It implies that rural land is owned by the village collective, and it cannot be sold or illegally transferred. Peasant households can transfer the land operation rights in the form of subcontracting, leasing, swapping, and cooperation.

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[11] Yu Jingxian, "Long-Term Unchanged Land Contract Relationship Is a Major Declaration (Policy Interpretation)," People's Daily, November 29, 2019.

[12] Zhou Huaizong, "Extension of Land Contracts Requires Improvement of Supporting Policies," Nanjing University News, March 4, 2024.

Land transfer in rural areas across the country has accelerated steeply. According to the China Rural Policy and Reform Statistics Annual Report, as of 2022, the total area of land with operation rights transferred was 576 million mu, accounting for 36.73 percent of the national area of household contracted arable land; the number of peasant households who conducted transfer of land operation rights was about 76.8 million, accounting for 34.8 percent of the total number of peasant households.[13]

Over the past two decades, in the face of rural exodus, land conflicts, and even the disintegration of local communities, the central government has allocated a lot of funds to the improvement of infrastructure through the rural revitalization and the poverty alleviation schemes. In recent years, the official policy has once again emphasized the importance of the collective economy.

As the local situation is often much more complex than what the official policies can cover, we find that there are still many forms of village ownership and operation of social property in diverse forms. There are even some exceptional cases with collectively organized forms of production remaining outside the Household Responsibility System. In such cases, production on the land is the responsibility of the village collective rather than of individual households. This more closely resembles the earlier People's Communes and is the focus of the discussion below.

It is worth pointing out how contemporary official policy is once again emphasizing collective production. Over the past decade, the term "collective economy" has frequently appeared in official documents. In 2017, the report of the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC stated that the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy should "deepen the reform of the collective property rights system in rural areas, safeguard the property rights and interests of peasants, and strengthen the collective economy." In February 2022, the "Central Document No. 1—Stages of Reform of Rural Collective Property Rights System" was promulgated. It stated that about 960,000 organizations at the

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13    Zhang Yunhua, "Discussion on the Formation Mechanism of Rural Land Transfer Prices," Rural Work Newsletter, November 6, 2024.

township, village, and team levels were registered with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and received the Certificate of Registration of Rural Collective Economic Organizations. The rural collective economic organizations had a total membership of nine hundred million, while rural collective assets amounted to RMB 7.7 trillion, and collective land and other resources amounted to 6.55 billion mu (or about 1 billion acres).[14]

In June 2024, the Law of the PRC on Rural Collective Economic Organizations was adopted at the tenth meeting of the Standing Committee of the Fourteenth National People's Congress. The law reaffirms collective ownership of land, confirming that it is not a private good for sale or transfer. It formally legalizes the creation of rural economy collective organizations based on collective ownership of land resources, and states that "property collectively owned by members of rural collective economic organizations is protected by law, and no organization or individual may appropriate, misappropriate, retain, loot, privately divide or destroy it."[15]

What the term "collective" on paper means may vary according to specific, real-world contexts. Moreover, how different "rural economic collective organizations" actually operate and function requires extensive research. However, the government's pro-collective policies over the past ten years indicate that it is trying to address the problems of privatization of land resources, marketization, monetization, social polarization, and the risk of disintegration of rural societies since the Reform of 1979.

## Three Collective Communities in Rural China

In what follows, we examine three rural communities in different parts of China. We have visited them to try to learn on the ground how the community members or the local cadres live and think. The three communities have some features in common. Zhoujiazhuang

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14  Department of Policy and Reform, "Central Document No.1 Released: Stages of Rural Collective Property Rights System Reform," Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of China, March 9, 2022, zcggs.moa.gov.cn.

15  "Law of the People's Republic of China on Rural Collective Economic Organizations," Xinhua, June 29, 2024.

and Yakou call themselves a People's Commune and a commune, respectively, and Zhanqi a village collective. They all operate within that tradition. Further, beyond retaining collective land ownership, they also practice economic planning and commune management, while looking after the social welfare of all members.

Zhoujiazhuang (Zhou Clan) Township in Jinzhou City, Hebei province, is three hours' drive south of Beijing. Zhoujiazhuang is the only township in the country to implement a township-level accounting management system, and it is well known as "the Last People's Commune" in China, though nominally, it is a cooperative. Since the establishment of the cooperative in 1954, Zhoujiazhuang has persisted in the collective cultivation of land, rather than allocating land on a household basis. This involves employing work-points and year-end dividend management. The commune has ten production brigades, with about three thousand households and an overall population of twelve thousand.[16]

Yakou (Cliff Edge) Village Commune in Zhongshan City, Guangdong province, is in the south, at the Pearl River Delta. Only one hour's drive from Macau and Hong Kong, it is along a well-developed transportation network corridor, having access to the Beijing-Zhuhai Expressway, the Guangzhou-Zhuhai Intercity Light Railway, and the Shenzhen-Zhongshan Highway. Yakou does not call itself a People's Commune, but simply a commune. In the years since 1978, the village's land has not been allocated to households and is still farmed by production teams based on work-points. There are eight village groups and thirteen production teams, with around 850 households and a population of 3,500.

Zhanqi (Battle Flag) Village, in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, is in southwest China. It is situated in an environmentally rich region that is home to wild pandas and is referred to as the "Heavenly World" because of its fertile soil. The township is home to the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, a still-functioning project over two thousand years old, and is a World Heritage Site. Zhanqi Village has an arable land area of 5,430 mu and has jurisdiction

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16    Lau Kin Chi, "Revisiting Collectivism and Rural Governance in China: The Singularity of the Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 5 (October 2020): 32–34.

over sixteen village groups, around 4,500 people. Since 2000, the village has eliminated its Household Responsibility System in favor of collective management of land resources for community building. In February 2018, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping visited the village to inspect the work of rural revitalization. He praised the project, saying: "The Battle Flag is fluttering, true to its name." Since then, Zhanqi Village has been promoted as one of the best examples of rural revitalization due to its defense of the collective economy.

The three communities have worked hard to maintain communal governance. The challenges they face include those of collectively controlling and managing common resources, land property, allocation of labor power, producing surplus food, and managing revenue for social distribution. However, with the advantages that come from collective mobilization of resources, they have been well positioned to strategize their development goals and tackle problems of food sovereignty, pollution, poverty, unemployment, and equity. The communities have revived communal traditions and practices, and they have realized the need to build local sufficiency, local networks, and local governance for collective survival and welfare.

Next, we will examine how they struggle for food sovereignty at the grassroots level by centering agriculture, reorganizing the labor force, and turning toward agroecological agriculture. We will also see how they deal with polluting industries, and turn to seeking revenue from land rent, ecotourism, and educational programs to deal with public expenditures and improvement of livelihood, like housing, road construction, local job opportunities, and medical insurance.

## Food Sovereignty at the Community Level

In early March 2025, we visited Yakou Village Commune. It has a unique landscape, with 1,700 mu of paddy fields as well as 20,000 mu of fishponds, all of it surrounded by the highways and high-rise buildings of south China's hyper-developed coastal areas.

As our visit occurred during the spring sowing season, tractors were plowing the fields and rice seedlings were sprouting. Amidst the mechanized labor, peasants were working together in the fields. At around 11 am, we chatted with a group of elderly women who had finished the task of weeding and clearing the corners of fields. They were cleaning their hoes and washing their hands. They told us that they still practiced the work-point system. They worked from 8 am until 11 am, broke to have lunch at home, then resumed work at 1 pm to 4 pm. In busy periods, they could earn eighty work-points each day.

The work-points would be calculated at the year's end to determine their monetary value, depending on the income of the production team. We were told that each work-point was roughly equivalent to RMB 12. Previously, when the women were young, they would work in restaurants or factories. Now they can still work the land, if that is their choice. The commune accepts anyone who chooses to work, so employment is guaranteed. One woman said, "I am over 60 years old, but there is no retirement for a peasant!" She grinned, proud of her peasant status. She then got on her electric scooter and headed for home on the country road.

Why did Yakou Village decide to hold on to the commune system? Longtime village leader Uncle Man responded to our question with a determined voice. "I am a communist," he said. Uncle Man, whose full name is Lu Hanman, was the CPC village secretary in Yakou Village for thirty-seven years—until 2011, when he retired at the age of 73. Called the "barefoot village secretary" because he always worked in the fields with bare feet, he has insisted on protecting farming for food, and managed to obtain permission from the authorities to reclaim 40,000 mu of delta land in 2002 for agriculture. He argues that collectivized farming protects "the weak" and guarantees local food security.

When the pressure to implement the Household Responsibility System came to the village in 1979, the villagers under Uncle Man's leadership reached a consensus not to divide up the land use among individual households. The reason was practical. From the early 1980s to 2006 (when the agricultural tariffs were formally abolished),

each laborer was required to pay agricultural tax in the form of more than 600 kilograms of grain per year, as well as meat, egg products, and edible oil. The practical problem was that there was a serious labor shortage in the village. As Yakou Village is close to Hong Kong and Macao, many young people have left the village or migrated to work, do business, or run factories. Most of the people left behind are the elderly, women, and children. That meant that if Yakou Village had adopted the Household Responsibility System, it would have been difficult for households without young and strong members to pay the agricultural tariffs. In 1979, after discussions, they decided to continue with collective agricultural production through the work-point system. This not only solved the tax issue but also maintained the village's self-sufficiency through collective grain production. To this day, Yakou calls itself the Yakou Village Commune.

The solution was to implement "One village, two systems": those who are young and strong can go to the city to work, while those who stay behind participate in agricultural production. The village committee organizes them into thirteen production teams, collectively growing rice and distributing it according to their work. They are able to maintain the dignity of laborers with a decent income. In 2010, for example, the net income from rice cultivation was RMB 2.51 million, and the total income from land leasing business was RMB 15 million, while the total income distributed to agricultural laborers amounted to RMB 6 million, or RMB 17,000 per capita per year.

Additionally, Yakou has been very careful to protect the natural environment. Today, they do not accept polluting industries, even if they are highly profitable. In the mid-1970s, the village had a machinery industry. Later, between 1979 and 1981, they introduced ten foreign-funded factories to carry out the processing of imported materials with more than two thousand workers. The capital, equipment, and technology all belonged to outsiders. Foreign businesspeople used local cheap land, labor, and energy to engage in production, process the products, and export them to the international market. However, the wealth earned largely remained in the hands of the foreign businesses, while industrial

waste, wastewater, exhaust gas, and garbage polluted the land and the groundwater, resulting in the gradual disappearance of certain local species, the withering of grass and trees, and the undermining of the living environment.

Therefore, Yakou gave up industrial development in the mid--1980s, preferring to sacrifice profit for the sake of protecting the environment. Since then, Yakou has gradually moved toward ecological transformation, while ecological paddy landscapes and healthy farm products form the basis of new ecological tourism projects.

In the case of Zhoujiazhuang, the People's Commune system has remained intact up to the present. The role of the local leader Lei Jinhe, like Lu Manhan in Yakou Village, was paramount. At the time the Reform was being implemented, Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune Party Secretary Lei Jinhe, a veteran Communist militant since the Anti-Japanese War of the 1940s, wanted to maintain the People's Commune system, considering it superior. On November 30, 1980, Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune, with ten production brigades, held a referendum, in which the majority of the community's 3,055 households voted not to divide the farmland and other collective property.

A document in the Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune Museum shows that 274 households of the first production brigade signed and put their red fingerprints on the petition letter refusing to divide up the farmland. This document, now in a local museum, has not been propagated by mainstream media like the fingerprint contract of eighteen peasants in Xiaogang Village, Fengyang County, Anhui Province, who were hailed as the pioneers for dividing up farmland and cultivating it by individual households. To keep a low profile, Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune changed its name to a "Cooperative" in 1984, but it has retained the form and substance of People's Commune and its socialist collective economic system.[17]

The undivided farmland is worked by ten production brigades. Every year, the brigades assess the amount of staple foods,

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17  Liu Guoyun, Zhoujiazhuang: The Miracle of Rural China (Wuhan: Hebei People's Publishing House, 2016).

including wheat, millet, and other food items, that are required by the brigade households. Sufficient land is set aside to cultivate for the needs of the commune members. The remaining land is put into various agricultural projects, such as growing fruits and vegetables, cultivating seeds for wheat producers, harvesting timber, or running a dairy farm.

We have visited Zhoujiazhuang over ten times since 2011. Agriculture remains a core concern for this de facto People's Commune. They are currently undergoing a transition to green agriculture and the use of organic fertilizers. They have also registered the "Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune" brand name for agricultural products such as flour, millet, powdered milk, and sweet potato vermicelli. In 2024, even though the price of agricultural products plummeted nationwide, Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune was able to weather this situation and retain members' incomes because they had applied the principle of "retaining accumulation in years of abundance and subsidizing in years of arrears." Overall, their prioritization of agriculture has served as a bedrock for maintaining self-sufficiency and local food sovereignty.

By contrast, Zhanqi Village in south China adopted the Household Responsibility System in 1978. In the mid-1990s, its five collective enterprises closed one after another. In 1994, Zhanqi Village adopted the shareholding system to restructure its machine and brick factory, spicy bean sauce factory, brewery, flour mill, and composite fertilizer factory. These five enterprises became subordinate entities under a joint-stock cooperative society with a Board of Directors and Supervisory Board. This arrangement did not work well. Yang Mingxue, a member of the Discipline Inspection Committee of Zhanqi Village, described the problems as follows: "Enterprise managers were much less motivated in the absence of [individual] ownership incentives. Long-term management also led to a lack of separation between public and private interests and the loss of a large number of collective assets. Facing the background of an increasingly competitive market environment, enterprise efficiency declined."

In response, Gao Demin, co-general secretary of the CPC in Zhanqi Village, led a group of cadres in 2003 to visit Huaxi Village, Nanjie Village, and Liuzhuang Village, which were regarded as advanced collective economic villages in the New Era. There he learned that the economic strength of the village collective economy did not generally stem from the subdivision of land management but from the land resources being integrated under the village collective with unified management and operation.[18]

Upon returning from this research trip, the cadres lobbied each villager, one after another, asking them to donate a plot of roughly two hundred square meters to the collective, in return for the collective paying all their agricultural tariffs. Secretary Gao explained to the villagers that this was beneficial to both the village collective and the individual peasants. He argued that large-scale planting was conducive to improving agricultural production, villagers could reduce their work burden, and it would be easier to obtain investment from local or foreign enterprises.

Since then, the land under collective management has grown. By 2003, they had amassed around 100 mu of land under collective management. Then, in 2006, under the government policy of promoting a new socialist countryside, they got funding to acquire 500 mu of cultivated land. Recently, they have begun cooperating with other villages in agricultural activities.

Today, the registered population of Zhanqi Village is more than 4,400 people. They have around 2,000 mu dedicated to grain production. In the Spring Festival in 2025, the village committee gave each villager a bonus food package: "One bag of rice (5 kilograms), 2 packs of noodles (kilograms), a bottle of edible oil (900 milliliters), 1 packet of dumplings, and 2 boxes of sauce." Rice has always come first, the people of Zhanqi Village emphasize that they are very proud of producing rice by themselves.

In December 2024, we interviewed Gao Demin, who was deeply concerned about food security, even though there was no immediate problem of hunger or climate crisis. He said:

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[18]   Dong Xiaodan, Zhanqi Village Over Fifty Years: The Micro-foundation of Chinese Dedependency (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2024).

Zhanqi Village implements food storage, which fills our rice bowls with our self-grown food. That way, when we have staple food in our hands, we don't panic. For a human being, the priority is to survive; we don't necessarily need a mobile phone, we don't necessarily need to live in a multistorey building, but we cannot not consume food. Even though China has achieved urbanization, the countryside must be preserved. The main role of rural society is to be able to solve the food problem.

Currently, Zhanqi Village has cooperated with neighboring villages to build a 10,000-mu modern grain production park (special economic zone designated by local governments to attract foreign investors), develop high-quality farmland, and cover the agricultural industry chain, such as the formation of nursery, planting, drying, and storage, and even e-commerce sales to enhance value-added agricultural/industrial products, as well as ecotourism, education programs, and research activities. Recently, the village has built a grain drying and storage center, which can dry 90 tons of grain per day and store up to 600 tons. It serves not only the Zhanqi area but also the surrounding villages and communities.[19] Gao remarked, "I just want everyone to have an awareness of the danger of a food crisis. I took the lead and paid the first RMB 1,000 for the food storage center, that's over 200 kgs of rice."

Since 2012, Zhanqi Village has also addressed the problem of industrial pollution. They took the initiative to give up "scattered and chaotic" enterprises, closing or relocating five polluting enterprises: a compound fertilizer factory (moved), a brick factory (closed), a gravel factory (moved), a prefabrication factory (closed), and a foundry (moved). These closures paved the way for a transition to agroecology and for ecotourism.

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[19]  Peng Xiangping, "Paying Tribute to Advanced Models; Lu Xinyu, the First Secretary of Zanqi Village: Let the Gap Between the Urban and Rural Areas Become Smaller and Smaller, and the Villagers Live Better," Red Star News, February 6, 2024, 163.com.

## Land Revenues for Public Welfare

Each of the three rural communities discussed above relies on the land economy, based on land rent, in a diversified way. They have collective ownership of land and collective control of land use, while agriculture remains a key activity. However, income from agricultural production is low, so the communities need other revenues to cover social welfare expenses. Hence, they increase revenue through various other forms of land use, such as building factories for industry, creating storage spaces for logistics, developing commercial complexes or training centers, or leasing and even selling land.

Both Yakou Village Commune and Zhanqi Village tried heavy industries but sensibly gave them up later, finding the industries to be too polluting. Zhoujiazhuang ran valve factories quite successfully for some years. However, since 2011, the factories have been closed in the face of competition from small factories in neighboring towns. To keep up its revenue, Zhoujiazhuang turned to several other modes of land use. The old valve factories were turned into a modern industrial park for lease to enterprises; it built storage facilities for lease to logistics companies; it leased one brigade's land to an agricultural corporation from Hong Kong that grows vegetables; it turned another brigade's land into an orchard for ecotourism.

The commune's farmland was then redistributed among the production brigades. To deal with the growing population and to avoid turning more farmland into residential plots, Zhoujiazhuang allocated a zone in 2015 to build high-rise residential blocks with units for commune members to buy and own. The ground floor units are for commercial businesses, which the commune does not sell but leases. Ecotourism under the catchphrase "The Last People's Commune in China" has generated much income. Zhoujiazhuang also organizes "Red Education" training programs that have brought in handsome sums.

As early as 1982, Zhoujiazhuang began a unified plan providing free housing for each household. Each household is entitled

to a residential plot of about two hundred square meters to build a two-story house with a single gated private entrance. There is also public expenditure for improving infrastructure. All power facilities have been renovated to a high standard; all the streets and alleys have been cemented; all streetlamps have been renewed; all drinking water pipes have been replaced; all latrines have been renovated; and all households have been provided with natural gas. Further, the government has accredited each of the ten production teams as a "beautiful village" in Hebei Province.

This People's Commune is proud of the social welfare it provides to all members, including a per capita living allowance of RMB 500, an electricity subsidy of RMB 100, free installation of running water, and free medical insurance. In 2024, the total amount spent on social welfare was more than RMB 45 million. The medical insurance premium was increased to RMB 400 per person per year, and medical expenses, which amounted to nearly RMB 6 million, were paid in full by the commune.

In addition to the new rural social pension provided by the state, the Zhoujiazhuang commune grants a monthly allowance to those over 60 who have no children. The commune also pays for their living expenses, sends someone to care for them when they are sick, and pays for their medical and funeral expenses. Additionally, the commune pays for living expenses for disabled people who have lost the ability to work. Those disabled due to work injuries are given a subsidy of RMB 3,000 per year. Zhoujiazhuang has kindergartens, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. There is a health center in the township and a health clinic for each production brigade. In addition, the commune takes charge of weddings and funerals to promote a modest standard for such rituals, thereby avoiding the risk of wealth comparison and extravagant spending.

If Zhoujiazhuang has amassed land rent by leasing land for logistics, agriculture, industries, and commercial businesses, a similar situation prevails in Zhanqi Village. Since the 2000s, Zhanqi Village has begun separating collective ownership and asset management rights: the village recovered all collective pro-

perty rights through the liquidation of capital, fixed assets, and intangible assets of the local enterprises. For example, from 2003 to 2005, the village reformed the bean curd factory, brick factory, composite fertilizer factory, flour mill, and brewery. It paid RMB 4.2 million to the five enterprise managers and employees, which accounted for 20 percent of the shares. In this way, the village once again became the sole proprietor.

In 2011, Zhanqi Village completed the registration of the membership of the collective economic organizations, concentrated all arable land, re-established the right to issue certificates of communal membership with rights of land use, and assessed the value of the operating assets of the collective economy. It compared these assets with the headcount and distributed shares to each member. In the process of liquidation, the land was divided into three categories: agricultural land, which was valued at RMB 2,150 per mu; construction land, valued at RMB 46,000 per mu (the price of state-owned land acquisition); and other unutilized lands (such as barren land, roads, etc.), valued at RMB 2,150 per mu. They also registered a new company, Chengdu Jifeng Investment Management, to deal with collective assets and liquidation programs. The villagers designed a mechanism of benefit distribution: 50 percent goes to public accumulation and reproduction, 30 percent goes to public services and welfare undertakings, such as social management, and 20 percent goes to the villagers' share of dividends.

How does Zhanqi Village evaluate its experience of adopting the land economy? The leadership generally contends that "it is best to adopt a lease-based approach for collective public assets," since that clarifies the relationship between investor, owner, and operator, and emphasizes that the operator is the "cattle herder." In their current arrangement, the village collective is the sole landowner and uses land rent for securing communal livelihood.

In 2007, Zhanqi Village began comprehensive collective land management, making use of 208 mu of collective construction land to get an investment of RMB 98 million from the Chengdu Small City Investment Company. It received gross land revenue of RMB 130

million from this project. After using RMB 115 million to pay off the loan and interests, the village put the remaining RMB 15 million into residential community buildings and infrastructure construction.

In recent years, the village has benefited from ecotourism and educational programs. It built a complex where eighteen different rural arts and handicrafts are practiced, including wine making, edible oil extraction, bean paste and cotton shoe manufacture, and other traditional skills and arts. The Tianfu Agricultural Museum has been established. A 500-meter "snack street" offers regional food from all over Sichuan province. The Tianfu Zhanqi Hotel was built to accommodate the area's booming tourism. Moreover, the Sichuan Zhanqi Rural Revitalization Training Institute can accommodate two thousand people for training and learning about the experiences of rural revitalization.

In 2015, Zhanqi Village developed a "collective economic organization with members identification approach," identifying 1,704 people as members of the collective economic organization. They sold the right of land use of 13,447 mu of unused collective construction land at a price of RMB 525,000 per mu to Sichuan Maigao Tourism Company (with usage rights lasting forty years). The village thus obtained a revenue of RMB 7.06 million.

In 2024, the collective assets of Zhanqi Village amounted to RMB 119.68 million, and the collective economic income was RMB 7.3 million. There were eleven catering units, eleven lodging units, and eight productive enterprises, with a total output value of about RMB 300 million, offering employment to more than 1,200 people and paying taxes of more than RMB 3 million. They organized training programs for the Communist Party and government that yielded more than RMB 1.5 million. They also organized an educational "handcraft garden," which engaged primary and secondary school students in over than 600 classes with more than 30,000 people, and earned an income of more than RMB 400,000.[20]

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[20] Yan Bihua, "Zhanqi Village: Walking in the Forefront, Starting a Good Demonstration," People's Life Weekly, June 12, 2023; Tianfu Xindu, "A New Year's Custom in Zhanqi Village: Piles of New Year's Goods Make a Mountain of Happiness!," The Paper, January 25, 2025, thepaper.cn.

In the case of Yakou Village, its location within the development zone of Southern China makes it susceptible to pressures not just to lease land, but also to sell it. In 2002, Yakou completed its land reclamation project. According to Uncle Man, there was a risk that assets would be controlled by a minority of village leaders who might pursue immediate returns. Hence, Uncle Man thought it would be a better strategy to implement a shareholding system so that individual members have a say in the collective assets. That was even before the government began its policy to promote shareholding among villagers. With this in mind, the commune put 20,000 mu of reclaimed land into a shareholding scheme. Each village member was given a share of 5.5 mu, and the Yakou Villagers' Land Share Foundation was set up. This organization unified management, while collecting rent and paying annual dividends to each shareholder. Villagers who do not participate in collective production and run their businesses can also get a share.

In 2006, Yakou Village implemented a second shareholding scheme. Two years later, about 92 percent of shareholders voted to sell 11,700 mu of land at RMB 50,000 per mu to the Zhongshan City Land Reserve Center in one go. The price of RMB 540 million would cover the cost of social security and health insurance for the whole village, and each villager would get RMB 142,000 in cash. Villagers were shocked when, a few years later, they saw that the same piece of land was listed for sale at a starting bid price of RMB 500,000 per mu. They saw how the market price of land rocketed when arable land was officially and nominally converted to construction land during the real estate boom. Thus, in 2022, when a piece of land of 5,600 mu was proposed to be sold for RMB 360,000, the proposal failed to receive a two-thirds majority approval from the villagers, thanks to the exercise of the villagers' rights as shareholders.

## The Challenge of Collectivism

China has practiced small peasant farming and village governance for thousands of years. Its dynasties were often overthrown by

peasant uprisings whose main grievances were land concentration, heavy taxation, or foreign invasion. Likewise, the authority and stability of a new dynasty usually depended on implementing land redistribution and tax exemption, which guaranteed people's livelihoods and ensured their support in the face of foreign invasions. When the PRC was set up, the first significant move was to distribute land to peasants. The state also promoted cooperatization to encourage mutual-aid and collective efforts to handle production, irrigation, mechanization, and so on.

The first launching of the People's Communes during the Great Leap Forward Campaign in 1958 met with peasant resistance and had to be retracted soon after. The re-imposition of the People's Communes as an institution during the Cultural Revolution period was carried out with a political and administrative force from above, from the state. The result was that while the state guaranteed minimal survival and livelihood needs, including food, health, and education, the surplus value produced by peasants and rural laborers was extracted to contribute to China's industrialization.

Bo Yibo, Vice Premier of the PRC in 1979–1983—the years of the dismantling of the People's Commune institution—writes in his book, *A Review of Some Major Decisions and Events* (1991), that the country had to industrialize. It had to accumulate agricultural surplus for industrial investment, requiring some people to make sacrifices. The central government, after repeated discussions, determined that the peasants had to make such sacrifices and contributions.[21]

Agricultural collectivization was based on the massive extraction of agricultural surpluses by the state for primitive industrial accumulation. As Wen Tiejun argues, unlike the West, which developed through colonial plundering overseas during the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries and then transferred the cost of economic upgrading through a global regime after the Second World War, China achieved industrialization through introvert primitive accumulation in two ways: (1) extracting the surplus value of labor of the whole

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[21]  Bo Yibo, A Review of Some Major Decisions and Events, CPC Central Party School Press, 1991.

nation through highly collectivized social organization and the agricultural surplus through the price scissors between industrial and agricultural products; (2) investment of large--scale labor force into state infrastructure building. In the second, the labor force resource was capitalized as a substitute for capital scarcity. This whole national mobilization system afforded China the capacity to accomplish the "alarmingly dangerous saltation" of primitive accumulation for industrialization without compromising national sovereignty. However, the enormous institutional cost of this atypical development growth had to be borne by all citizens (and often unevenly).[22]

There have been many studies that look at how much collectivization contributed to the country's industrialization. From 1953 to 1986, the state implemented the policy of unified purchase and marketing, with the scissors price difference between industrial and agricultural products, to extract agricultural surplus for industrial production. It laid the initial foundation for China's industrial modernization.[23] Yan Ruizhen calculated that the "scissors difference" between the prices of agricultural and industrial products expanded by 44.9 percent from 1955 to 1978. Similarly, according to joint research conducted by the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council, the state obtained unequal exchanges of agricultural inputs that amounted to RMB 510 billion from 1954 to 1978.[24] In comparison, at the beginning of the Reform in 1978, China's entire state-owned industrial fixed assets were only RMB 960 billion. Kong Xiangzhi calculated that the various contributions made by peasants over sixty years were about RMB 13.7 trillion.[25]

[22] Wen Tiejun, Ten Crises: The Political Economy of China's Development (1949–2020) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[23] Yan Ruizhen et al., China's Price Scissors between Industry and Agriculture (Beijing: People's University of China Press, 1988).

[24] The General Research Group on Agricultural Inputs, "Agricultural Protection: Current Situation, Basis and Policy Recommendations," China Social Science, no. 1 (1996).

[25] Kong Xiang-zhi and He An-hua, "On the Contribution of Peasants to the Construction of New China for 60 Years," Teaching and Research 43, no. 9 (2009): 5–13.

Hence, the establishment of People's Communes as an institution was highly effective in organizing production and increasing productivity, but collectivism imposed from above may not always have been welcomed by the commune members. It has also resulted in a divide and polarization between urban and rural China. This explains why the Household Responsibility System, which dismantled the People's Commune system, was popular and could be claimed by the authorities to be done in compliance with the people's wishes.

With the 1978 Reform, scattered peasant households became the main agents of production, while some rural collectives were retained to perform specific services and management functions. While the village communities maintain land ownership accompanied by the right of land adjustment and rent collection, peasants are entitled to household contract rights, can decide what to produce, and have the right to operational profits.

The demise of the People's Commune system meant that the government retreated from the agricultural sector as well as public welfare services such as health and education in the countryside. Those costs are now borne by individual households. Various official rural institutions, such as credit cooperatives and supply and marketing cooperatives, have weakened in the following period of speedy urbanization. The four decades of Reform policy in China went hand in hand with the adoption of export-oriented industrialization, making the country into a kind of world factory. In the international division of labor, being a semiperipheral country, China sacrifices labor power and natural resources and provides a part of its surplus value to core countries. The dissolution of the People's Communes in favor of the Household Responsibility System meant that the countryside acquired more autonomy but has also become susceptible to market fluctuations in the age of neoliberalism. The displacement of Township and Village Enterprises has also occurred as a result of the opening of the coastal areas to transnational manufacturing industries. All of this, coupled with the brain and capital drain from the countryside, means that rural society risks disintegration.

In recent years, the United States and Europe have imposed sanctions on China, and in the face of these hostilities, the Chinese government began promoting both domestic consumption and rural revitalization. Revitalizing the countryside has meant *reorganizing* scattered peasant producers and reactivating rural collectives. All of this takes place against the backdrop of a major step taken in 1998 that fosters local governance and democratic participation. At that time, the Organization Law of the Villagers' Committees of the PRC was implemented, with the result that 600,000 Chinese villages directly elect their village chiefs every three years.

Looking back, we can see how millions of Chinese peasants experienced, first, the phase of communalization that occurred during the three decades following the Revolution, then relative atomization and individuation over the past four decades of Reform. The effects of these major policy shifts inevitably vary according to specific contexts. The three communities examined in this paper, each with its history and trajectory, are no exception to this principle. What made them hold on to collective management practices over the long haul, and how did they do it? Each had a strong, respected local leader committed to communist ideals and principles who demonstrated altruism and dedication, thereby securing the following of the cadres and villagers around them. It is also important to point out that in all three cases, going against the grain of marketization and liberalization required extra efforts on the part of the local communities to insist on pursuing their preferred path. It was only through extensive negotiations among the village stakeholders to agree on the greatest good for both the collective and its members that the many internal contradictions and conflicts could be resolved.

Uncle Man expressed his worries of common goods being dismantled, which may be taken to represent a widespread sentiment in the communities we examined. He said, "We have accumulated a large number of land resources and wealth after decades of hard work, but internal and external forces want to seize and plunder our wealth, which has made it difficult and risky to keep our community." To avoid these dangers, these three

rural communities have charted their own paths in defending the commons for the sake of self-sufficiency and collective survival, particularly in caring for groups who are vulnerable under the logic of the market, who would suffer under a more atomized system. They are attentive to the problems of wealth disparity and polarization. Collective ownership and management of land resources help to guard against plunder and appropriation by powerful insiders or outsiders.

In conclusion, we would like to make the following general observation. Forming and maintaining a collective or commune cannot be run by appealing merely to the economic and monetary interests of the members. Individualism and egoism are disruptive, so bonds based on social and interpersonal relationships need to be nurtured. When the majority of the collective or commune's members can see how individual contributions relate to the public good (which in turn benefits the individuals); when they have initiative, satisfaction, and pride in being a member of the collective and in contributing their labor; when they see the long-term responsibility to enable future generations to live in an amicable political, economic, social, cultural, and natural environment, then there is hope and vitality in the commune.

If we understand the changing natural conditions of existence not only as the result of nature itself but also as the outcome of more or less deliberate and active intervention by different human communities in their habitats, we must ask ourselves certain questions: how to rethink the relationship between human communities and their living space, which includes nature; how to derive strategic orientations from this; how to organise ourselves to make appropriate decisions regarding goals and their realisation; how to reorganise if we are dissatisfied with the goals and outcomes set, especially if they have changed in the past; and how to organise in the future if we remain dissatisfied with the goals and outcomes achieved.

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