# CHAPTER 5. The Emancipation of the Precariat: Urban Power, Basic Income, Climate Justice

Since the 90s, radical movements across Europe have targeted resurgent racism and fascism. Mass unemployment is giving new life to fascists and Nazis across the globe. Just like in the 30s, the depression is fanning the flames of nationalism. So for the radical left the antifa/antira organization of precarious, immigrants, unemployed is now a matter of survival. Radicals are building bridges of social solidarity between the precarious and refugees, while the children of immigrants are already active in student and labor movements. Organizations are being born where mixitéand métissage are the norm, where the precarious join in common struggles and campaigns against borders and precarity, no matter whether they are Black or White, Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, red or anarchist. A cross-border movement is defending the disenfranchised in Europe, helping refugees arrive safely, and defending them from expulsion and deportation. No One Is Illegal! Second-generation immigrant youth are at the forefront of the social conflicts confronting securitarianism and cryptofascism; islamophobia is the contemporary equivalent of anti-Semitism during the interwar years, the fault line between left- and right-wing politics. In declining conditions, only communally minded efforts can bridge the gulf between immigrant and native workers, service and creative labor, and rebellious immigrant youth and dissident White youth. In short, only these collective actions can root out the social causes of mounting xenophobia.

Young members of the global precariat need to organize, and vocally share the kind of demands that were popularized by a 2014 article in Rolling Stone:[[1]](#footnote-1) guaranteed work, basic income for all, taxation of the wealthy, public ownership of common goods, and socialized credit. This should be the minimal political program of the precariat.

The precariat is the sum of people working precarious jobs in both dependent and independent employment, and those suffering unemployment, either intermittently or permanently. We can distinguish a service precariat (working at Wal-Mart, Amazon, Uber, McDonald’s, etc.) and a cognitive precariat (such as those engaging in the struggles of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization during the mid-90s), but what is most important to recognize is the emergence of the precariat as a class in the making, a class that is becoming a class for itself through the exploits of the 2011 revolutions, the global social mobilizations against austerity and inequality, and currently against right-wing populism.

The precarious are the children of wage- and salary-earners shut out of meaningful social and professional advancement. The precarious are the contemporary equivalent of plebeians and proletarians. They are the class that nobody wanted to name because it was a condition lived in shame. Now that temps are the norm, and the perms the exception, the time has come to acknowledge the precariat as the maker of contemporary digital and financial wealth. The precariat has nothing, but shall soon be everything.

As conclusion to this essay, I propose four main planks to emancipate the precariat from its subjugation: seize municipal power; obtain universal basic income; organize the syndicate of the precariat; lead the de-carbonization of the economy.

## The Spanish Experiment with Democratic-Populism and Ecosocial-Municipalism

Spain has been a hotbed of political experimentation with social populism. In aftermath of the occupations of central squares in Madrid, Barcelona, and other major of Spanish cities in 2011, the Indignados Movement caused a sharp break with politics as usual, uncovering the network of corruption linking bankers with politicians of the Christian-Democrat (PP) establishment, and gaining mass consensus among the populace. On 12 May 2012, the countrywide mobilization of millions of people was repeated in a more organized and disciplined manner. A section of the movement then decided to create its own party for the European election of 2014: Podemos. Millions of voters rallied behind its purple flag - mostly the young, surviving on unemployment benefits and short-term jobs - while the brain drain adversely affected the country's already stagnant economy, as educated youth poured out of Southern Europe in search of a better future in Northern Europe and America. Podemos also surpassed, and embarrassed, the existing party of the left, Izquierda Unida (IU), which had been a staple of Spanish politics for twenty-five years. Podemos’ young, telegenic, pony-tailed leader, Pablo Iglesias, borrowed from Gramsci, Negri, and Chávez, in order to create a new political vocabulary which was used in online deliberations regarding the party’s platform. A former anti-globalization activist in Madrid, Pablo Iglesias, who had been rejected by Izquierda Unida (IU) as a top candidate for the European Parliament, decides to form his own party. Yet still his heart belongs to the left; he has recenly brought the IU into an (not very effective) electoral alliance, and sits in the GUE/NGL (red) group of European Union legislators in Strasbourg and Brussels. The party's ideologue, Iñigo Errejón, is a more intellectual and less charismatic figure, and a more straightforward heir of Laclau’s theorizing on left-populism. A student of Laclau’s partner, political theorist Chantal Mouffe, he coherently articulates a fully egalitarian, populist project, which is based on the political and economic demands articulated by the majority of the Spanish population. Eschewing anti-capitalism and a narrow focus on poverty, in the recent congress Errejón pleaded for a more effective cultural strategy, as well as a focus on parliamentary struggle, in order to effectively wield collective power within the Spanish state. In Spain’s political stalemate of 2015-2016, with two general elections in less than a year, Podemos – now combined with IU – lost votes and failed to surpass the PSOE, the Spanish socialists, to the chagrin of Iglesias. In my view, this failure was confirmation that only a decisive break with the leftist tradition, as argued by Errejón, can permanently anchor social populism in Spain and, hopefully, the rest of Europe. However, Podemos’ recent congress, held after their nemesis Rajoy renewed his hold on government, resulted in the triumph of Pablo Iglesias’ leftism, and the defeat of his deputy's populism.

The greatest legacy of the Indignados’ revolution has arguably been the conquest of municipal power in Madrid and Barcelona. In Madrid, Podemos heads a rather conventional leftist front, but in Barcelona, a related but distinct political formation, En Comú, made Ada Colau, leader of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) – a mass movement against home foreclosures caused by mortgage defaults – mayor of the city. Colau gave a credible face to an urban movement that distilled a novel synthesis of the political demands that I dub ecosocial populism. In her heart-warming electoral appeal to the people of Barcelona, she said:

We are the precarious, we are the women, we are the queers, we are the barrio dwellers, we are the feminists, we are the immigrants, we are the environmentalists, the workers, the intellectuals.

Her electorate contains the people that make Barcelona a vibrant city and an example of tolerance for the rest of Europe.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thanks to a clear municipal program, which focused on the struggle against inequality, the development of public services, a curb on mass tourism to put a stop on rent increases, sustainable energy and waste management – entirely the result of online and in-person consultations – En Comú ended up the victor of a thrilling, three-way race between the PP-PSOE duopoly, and ruling Catalan secessionists.

When a program sponsored by central Podemos failed to elicit the same enthusiastic response in the subsequent regional elections of Catalonia, the circle of social-media-savvy activists that built the Ada Colau campaign prevailed on Madrid to present a distinct list in Catalonia for the upcoming national elections, En Comú Podemm. It was a resounding success, and constituted a serious leap forward (in terms of seats and votes gained) for Podemos as a whole. In Barcelona, a regional party is now being created, in order to run against the bourgeois Catalan independence movement who control the Generalitat, the radical Catalans of Esquerra Catalana, and especially Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), a marxist-leninist formation fanatically focused on Catalan independence, symbolized by the increasingly proudly waved Estelada flag. The hope is to repeat the exploits of the municipal elections. Still, the calling of referendum on Catalonia's secession from Spain hangs like Damocles' sword over the future of eco-feminist and social-populist colauismo. In my view, her success depends on the urban and Catalan questions to be framed in terms of class, rather than identity. If the polarity opposing the mercantile bourgeoisie of Gracia and Barrio Gotico to the urban precariat of youngsters and immigrants in Raval and Poble Sec is replaced by the Yes/No chasm on Catalunyna as a sovereign state separate from Spain, the damage to the egalitarian cause could be similar to the one caused by the Remain/Leave debate in the British referendum to secede from Europe. The first reason for this is that over a million people in Catalonia are non-Catalans, having migrated there either from other areas of Spain, or other countries entirely. Secondly, it would be hard for En Comú to position itself in the eventuality of such a referendum, when Podemos in Madrid favors autonomy, but not independence from Spain. Thus, their alliance would be endangered if En Comú opted to support independence as the lesser evil. Furthermore, from a populist perspective, it would be hard to both argue otherwise, and remain politically relevant.

Today Barcelona is a city that has 200,000-strong demonstrations demanding greater refugee intake from the central government, which bans Uber and limits commercial tourism, where neighborhoods like Poble Sec and Barceloneta thrive with associations, social centers and environmental initiatives, and good old sociability. The city has definitely become more livable for locals and visitors after the decrease of sort of the hit-and-run tourism endemic before the crisis, and Ada is a popular mayor, who has made social participation in city politics and local economic sustainability efforts the hallmarks of her municipal program. The queer and green brand of municipalism being experimented with in Barcelona is something that can be exported, and is already being endorsed by other world cities. Mayor of New York Bill De Blasio is a fan of Ada Colau’s. His election as mayor (replacing media financier Michael Bloomberg) was probably the biggest single political change achieved by Occupy Wall Street (although other city administrations have also taken a decidedly leftward turn in recent years).

The realities of institutional power, and municipal government, pose formidable challenges for social movements that decide to make the leap from contestation and protest to counterpower and counterhegemony – from destituent power to constituent power, in Negrian terms. No matter how daunting, the emergence of a reactionary rival, steeped in xenophobia, homophobia, and hard-fisted police repression, namely the nationalist international currently in power in Washington and Moscow (not to mention Budapest and Warsaw, Cairo and Ankara, and Tokyo and Dehli), forces radical-democracy movements to up the ante, and occupy the state (or at least some of its parts) in order to resist the assault on democratic freedoms and multicultural communitarianism, currently masterminded by the Trump-Putin-Erdogan triangle of evil.

## Universal Basic Income: The Wage of the Precariat

The precariat clearly needs to craft alternative institutions to overcome the deflationary tendencies of neoliberalism, and the repressive tendencies of Nazi-populism. Institutions are social and political technologies that co-evolve with information and material technologies. The Great Recession has exposed the fact that existing property relations are hindering the further development of an informational and automated economy; maldistribution depresses the economy by killing the buyers. Compressing the precariat’s aggregate income has reduced the wealth of nations. Thus, the precariat needs to design and impose institutions that redistribute wealth and productivity in the general interest.

So far, trillions of dollars have been given to perpetrators of the financial crisis, and peanuts its victims - the precarious and the unemployed. The more the rich accumulate wealth, the more demand sags, and unemployment rises. The structural root of the crisis lies in the crushing inability of thirty years of neoliberalism to redistribute the gains in productivity to the precarious population at large, thus undermining demand, and causing stagnation.

Given capitalism’s long-term tendency to higher inequality, absent wars, and social upheavals, the precariat needs to keep pushing for subversion and insurrection. However, it also needs to secure redistribution with a new social allocation of wealth, independent from increasingly scarce work, namely a Universal Basic Income (UBI). This would be funded by a general taxation, representing the technological dividend of each individual’s contribution to social knowledge.

The basic concept behind UBI stems from the revolutionary work of Tom Paine, and his Agrarian Commonwealth. It was proposed to Nixon by policy expert Daniel Moynihan, as social remedy to ongoing race riots at the end of the 60s. Since the 80s, it has been discussed as either a complement, or a supplement, to the existing welfare system. It is also known as ‘citizenship income’ or as ‘income of existence’, and is, in essence, an unconditional social transfer. Negative income tax is not basic income, because the recipient must work to get the rebate (thus there is conditionality involved). The philosophical implications and justifications of UBI were first investigated by libertarian philosopher and political economist Philippe van Parijs who, in Why Surfers Should Be Fed[[3]](#footnote-3)provided an unassailable liberal justification for unconditional basic income. It was justified on grounds of individual freedom and basic human rights, as imposing work on people was a violation of their individual freedom. There are people who would work fewer hours (or not work altogether), and people who desire to work but are left out of the job market. A universal allocation based on average purchasing power (such as $/€1,000 a month from the age of 18 until death) would thus free people to pursue their projects and dreams, and thus enhance total welfare.

I will not delve into the details of the topic here. Those interested should read the research done on the social desirability and economic feasibility of a universal transfer written by the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), and Scott Santens.[[4]](#footnote-4) All I wish to note here are the salient features of a potential basic income for the precariat, a Utopia for Realists, as Rutger Bregman aptly titles his hopeful and well-researched book.[[5]](#footnote-5)

First of all, the introduction of an unconditional basic income would abolish workfare and cease the persecution, and eventually the stigmatization, of people on welfare. These are already enormous political results. Strictly in regard to welfare, it would give precarious workers a bridge by which to move between jobs without having to go through complex bureaucratic procedures simply in order to collect unemployment benefits. It would also abolish income uncertainty attached to temporary jobs ­– a major political victory for the precariat.

The most liberating aspect of basic income is in how it would free people’s time, thus unleashing the potential to do the things they really want to do, from caring for children to engage in social activism, or idling around playingGrand Theft Auto V*I* before starting digital co-ops in Lagos. For squats, social centers, and hacklabs, basic income would be a boon, because it would allow people to become full-time activists. It would also put commercial co-working spaces out of business.

Crucially, basic income makes people really free to choose whether they wish to work, or not, and for how long. In other words, it makes flexibility advantageous for temps. Basic income would also give precarious the option of refusing bullshit jobs, since they can rely on alternative source of income – namely UBI. By removing conditionality, the unequal exchange on which capitalism has always been based – work, or starve- would be abolished. And this is the greatest political weakness of basic income: can capitalism survive without fear?

This is what capitalist management and party commissars always held over people. Either under private capitalism or state communism, it was the specter of hunger that sent peasants into factories. In the England of the of the early 19th century, in order to make the population of the countryside more willing, the Poor Law was reformed, thus the rural masses had no choice but enter the satanic mills of the First Industrial Revolution. It was Stalin’s collectivization of agriculture that, by bringing about famine, forced peasants to migrate to industrial towns during the first Five-Year plan (1928-33).

Whilst capitalism has always asserted on that there's no such thing as a free lunch, basic income buys you lunch without you having to work. It's a subversion of capitalist discipline. Being paid to do nothing goes against the culturally ingrained work ethic, and doesn’t encourage people to work tedious jobs for little reward.

There will be strong political resistance on the part of employers, especially low-wage employers, to the introduction of basic income. However, the progressive sectors of capital have already come to accept it as the inevitable price to pay, in order to avoid a reactionary backlash against globalization. The time has come to make them finally pay for the crisis. The economic cost of UBI is definitely bearable by the government budgets of advanced economies. A basic income scheme in the U.S., comprising of $12,000 dollars per year, per citizen above the age of 18, would have a net cost for government of around $900 million. This is equivalent to less than 3% of federal tax receipts. UBI is not impossibly costly; the hurdles are fundamentally political.

Regarding the political left, the problem with basic income goes against the socialist labor principle of to each according to their work, or in other words, to each according to their productivity. If you do not work you are not entitled to an income, only to an unemployment subsidy. While social redistribution efforts have never had a better chance, the left is in serious disarray, still attached to socialism (and communism), and praising the value of work, an element understandably shared by labor unions. Culturally, most leftists have yet to come around to the idea that the area of non-work is a tangible, and growing, social reality – one that makes basic income unavoidable. It is only the political pressure of the precariat that will make UBI a reality.

## The Precariat Syndicate

In Malmö at the 2008 European Social Forum, Michael Hardt hailed the General Freeters' Union in Japan as the first revolutionary syndicate in the world committed to the migrant and precarious’ cause, and commended EuroMayDay in Europe for trying to do the same. Movements of the precariat have been usually working in tandem with radical and / or syndicalist unions, while keeping true to their anarcho-autonomist ideology and adopting a repertoire of ‘fluffy’ and ‘spiky’ practices, from the irreverent Pink Clown Army, to confrontational black bloc tactics.

Traditionally, trade unions have been largely unwilling or unable to organize precarious workers in countries with two-tier labor markets. In Japan, casual workers and immigrants are excluded from official labor organizations and stigmatized by conservative public opinion. This is why young precarious workers have come together in Tokyo and Osaka, and formed a union, which organizes temps of all genders and ethnicities. This union constitutes my template for the Precariat Syndicate.

After unemployment started to be a European problem in the 80s, movements soon emerged to stage the fight against its sources: precarity and unemployment. It was in France that the first actions undertaken by organized unemployed youth took place. Many took to the streets and destroyed property (earning the enduring nickname of casseurs(breakers)) in prolonged campaigns, the most enduring example of which is the Action Chomage! (AC!) campaign that, born in the early 90s, lasted well into the 00s.[[6]](#footnote-6) Strikes in Paris over 2001, which also involved the occupations of various McDonald's and Pizza Hut outlets, were supported by the Stop Précarité campaign led by radical sections of French Unionism (CGT, CNT and Solidaires) and the European Marches against Precarity, which themselves were part of the anti-globalization movement. Abdel Mabrouki emerged as spokesperson of the fast food strike movement in Paris, and reflected upon his experience in the tellingly titled Génération Précaire*.*[[7]](#footnote-7) He, along with the other strike delegates, were invited as guests of honor to Milan's first May Day Parade, a few months ahead of the massive protests and riots of the Genoa G8 countersummit (actions which were aggressively repressed by Berlusconi’s government). The French movement of Intermittents, which paralyzed French culture festivals in the mid-00s, was also deeply enmeshed in the development of protests and reflections on the issues of precarity, intermittent work, and the new kind of welfare that had to address the plight of the precariat, symbolized in Italy by the popular San Precario icon.

These early attempts at organizing the precariat placed emphasis on the need for autonomous, self-managed, and transnational organizations which could potentially see their demands responded to. These demands usually centered around putting an end to the labor discrimination of young people, the persecution of migrants, and the need for a strong minimum wage and a decent universal basic income - fundamental steps that must be taken in order to defeat precarity.   
  
In 2006, students and unions repelled the first-employment contract (CPE) as Place de la Sorbonne was rechristened as Place de la Précarité. The French presidency (then held by Chirac) had to concede defeat after millions took to the streets. In 2016, Place de la République was occupied for months by Nuit Debout, protesting against Loi Travail making labor cheaper and more precarious, which was hammered through Parliament by the Socialist president and prime-minister, whose careers in politics were terminated as a result.

Precarious labor advocacy groups have emerged in many parts of Europe over the last decade, while Sciopero Sociale (Social Strike), part of the Blockupy movement that lay siege to the ECB's Eurotower between 2012 and 2015 and organized by radical precarious workers' collectives, managed to paralyze Rome, Milan and other major cities in the fall of 2014. The ChainWorkers in Milan, Yo Mango in Barcelona, Prekariaatti in Helsinki, Precarious Superheroes in Berlin, Precarias a la Deriva and Oficina Precaria in Madrid, Bob le Précaire in Liège and Brussels, Officine Zero in Rome, Precarious Angry Brigade in London, la Rede investigadores contra a precariedade cientifica in Lisbon, and Prekaer Café and Precarity Office in Vienna, are among the many noteworthy past and present precarious collectives that have made global anti-precarity action a viable option today.

Colau gained national popularity as leader of the PAH movements against home forecloses, managing to confront Spanish banks, and the evictions of thousands of indebted families. Housing rights have been important for the mobilization of Spain's precarious youth since the V for Vivienda campaign against rent increases in the mid-00s. In Berlin and Rome, too, movements have focused on the urban question, the protection of low-income neighborhoods from gentrification, and squatting public housing in order to house precarious and immigrant families.

However, a general union federation of the precariat has yet to emerge in Europe. We need to build a pan-European syndicate of the precarious, the unemployed, the excluded, and the exploited. The alternative is the slide toward the form of patriotic sectionalism and xenophobia that was noticeable in Brexit and the Dutch elections. Mass unemployment makes the sirens of proletarian nativism and racism very seductive. Transnationalist solidarity must be organized; this will not occur by default. We have to organize the precarious and unemployed youth, the generation that yearns for freedom from police persecution and equality of treatment and opportunity.

In America, since the Justice for Janitors campaign in the late 90s, service and retail unions like SEIU have been working with grassroots movements, work that has culminated in the Fight for $15 campaign that is currently seeking to redress the recent explosion in inequality. The movement for a national living wage has already achieved localized success in Seattle and New York, and was behind the (modest) growth in wages seen during the Obama administration. However, the rise of decidedly anti-labor sentiments across the country, evidenced in Trump’s appointment, creates daunting challenges for the movement. Trump's hotels have been recently unionized in Arizona – perhaps evidence that the national-populist turn in American politics could be faced down by organized labor.

Social unionism, which sees local unions working with civil society in order to support labor struggles, seems to fit the left-populist bill. Social unionism is clearly egalitarian, and thus populist, in nature, and supports the emergence of labor organizations (and movements of the precariat) that fight to share wealth and opportunity. Whereas it is absolutely crucial, in this historical phase, to work together with diverse orientations that share widely-conceived common objectives (such as gender equality, civil rights, labor dignity, and lifetime social security), it is also important that the precariat fights to impose its own economic agenda. This agenda rests on two pillars: a doubling of the minimum wage, and universal basic income.

A precariat syndicate of the world, which would federate urban precarious workers within and across continents, is something I hope to see in my lifetime. Whilst this is a wobbly ideal, existing anarcho-syndicalism has too narrow an appeal to command the allegiance of a very culturally diverse precarious population. It is rightly libertarian, but is usually sectarian. It mostly organizes public workers in areas where memories of past radicalism persist, but is unable to deal with the transformations of contemporary society, save for a few exceptions, such as the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) in Spain, a national anarcho-syndicalist organization, centered around Catalonia. Sadly, the French union of the same name is instead a strictly red union, in spite of its syndicalist origins, and has been strictly communist in its ideology since the end of World War Two. It has long been the most combative labor organization in France (and possibly Europe), and gave support to Nuit Debout. However, the French CGT rests on the assumption that radical youth must support the union-led labor movement, the opposite of my suggestion herein (this assumption is unfortunately shared by red unions across of Europe). Every popular uprising in France has seen the CGT attempt to steer social protest toward concrete economic demands, rather than push for systemic change. It is also worth noting that, while the students were burning down the Paris stock exchange in late May 1968, CGT leader Henri Krasucki was signing the Grenelles agreements, in secret, with Jacques Chirac. The future president had been sent by De Gaulle to negotiate a labor truce at any cost, and conceded all wage demands in order to separate workers from students, and finally break the revolutionary dynamics that the students of Nanterre and the Sorbonne had set in notion.

In more recent times, it was dismaying to see the more reformist, but still red, CGIL (the largest Italian union) failing to back the feminist strike that hundreds of collectives of young women painstakingly prepared. The secretary - a woman to boot - explained to dumbfounded queer activists that unions do not call general strikes for ‘abstract causes’. The fact is that the CGIL themselves have never called a national strike against precarity. The union is utterly disconnected from the issues that concern Italian youth, and has been so since its leadership supported the police entering the University of Rome to evict the student occupation in 1977. Even in its opposition to the Jobs Act, Italy’s watered-down version of Loi Travail, all the union cared about was defending the status of permanent employees, rather than improve the conditions of precarious workers.

Gender equality is the fundamental social thread running through the variously orchestrated struggles of women around the world. Women are united as a front in an attempt to end male violence, pay discrimination, patriarchal oppression, and misogynist regression. As Micah Jones rightly predicted, the global women's movement is emerging as the successor of the international movement of the squares. A pink tide is changing politics around the world, and this should be reflected in the organizations and institutions of the precariat. The global women’s strike that took place on 8 March 2017, was a major step towards the creation of a global precariat movement; it is no secret that women are disproportionately represented in precarious occupations. As Italian intellectual Cristina Morini has written, the #feministrike was ‘the first global strike of the precarious era.’[[8]](#footnote-8) We need a pink union, and we need a purple party of the precariat (or the other way around). The race is on to find the style of communication, and ideological model, that works best in practice. My recommendation is to adopt a populist discourse based on simple slogans and pop irony, and really enable egalitarian forms of participation in defining planks and decisions affecting the precarious themselves.

Looking elsewhere, Catholic unionism has had a keener interest than communist unionism in the precariat, due to the Vatican's current position regarding neoliberal inequality. In fact, Pope Bergoglio recently sang a ringing condemnation of precarious labor practices, proclaiming (to an audience of scolded labor consultants) that 'families are suffering because of the lack of labor and its precarity’. Much like red unions, catholic unions recruit along multi-ethnic and multi-confessional lines (for instance, Jeunes organisés et combatifs (JOC) in Belgium). Christian unions are certainly not fixated on anti-genderism like the current Pontiff. White unionism is really catholic in the English sense, attracting all sorts of people, including atheists and Muslims, because the meek and precarious shall inherit the Earth.

## A New Social Compromise to Stave Off Global Fascism

What are the fundamental social and political needs of the precariat the need to be addressed? The emancipation from precarity, the defeat of national populism and neoliberal oligarchy in order to achieve radical democracy, gender equality, and the end of ethnic discrimination. The precariat agitates for a fair-share, solar-powered information economy, an uncensored network society with open source practices and open borders, a new welfare system based on universal basic income, local and global mutualism, a green new deal creating millions of green jobs, and the upgrading of the gig economy to a real sharing economy - one that properly shares profits between workers and consumers.

The end of open borders in Europe (essentially signaling the end of the Schengen agreement), and the closing of America brought about by the Muslim ban, portend a more general reorganization of borders and trading blocs, with Britain seceding from the European Single Market, and the European Union embracing free trade with Canada, while a nationalist America drops the TTP with East Asia, shelves the TTIP with Europe, and wishes to renegotiate the terms of NAFTA. Clearly the precariat needs to be a major political actor in these geopolitical and geoeconomic quakes. A Continental republic of free cities and regions is the constitutional utopia that the precariat should aspire to create. Women, minorities, and precarious youth have the combined numbers to muster enough energy to ram through a redistribution of European powers, and dispense with Maastricht's deflationary strictures. A veritable democracy can finally rise in Europe, in lieu of the present fissiparous confederation of nation-states, if the people seize constituent power to defeat resurgent neoliberalism, and plant the seeds of a fully-fledged European democratic republic.

If the political implications of the socio-economic theory of the Great Recession illustrated earlier in this text are correct - namely that the historical bifurcation we face admits only either reformist or reactionary outcomes, and that only a novel compromise between democracy and capitalism can prevent the second coming of fascism - then the trial-and-error search is on for what the Jobsian equivalent to the Fordist industrial compromise might be. Much like Fordism, it would have to be expansionary, equalizing, inclusive, and democratizing. The answer needs to be found within contemporary class structures, and in the historical array of political forces that vie for state power. After the crisis of neoliberalism, a multiethnic precariat confronts political authoritarianism and digital oligopoly. The American national-populist solution to the crisis relies - much like Nazism did in the 30s - on fiscal expansion, in order to finance military rearmament and domestic infrastructure. It is similarly nativist, protectionist, anti-women, anti-minorities, homophobic, and anti-labor. However, even American capital is not united in supporting Trump's nazi-populist project. Domestic resistance - both in radical and liberal forms - remains fierce, especially from the feminist, labor, and African-American movements. Silicon Valley has been split asunder on the issue of whether to support Trump’s actions. Xi Jin Ping made it clear during the Davos summit that globalization can proceed without America, and implicitly proposed that the new guarantor of the global capitalist order would soon be China. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum appealed for the creation of a universal basic income, as a way to defuse the populist threat to liberal capitalism.

On the new geopolitical and geoconomic board, incredible dangers lie ahead, not least the final triumph of the Carbon Liberation Front (as McKenzie Wark ironically refers to the forces of fossil-fuel capitalism), which now commands America’s strategic interests, and promise only climate destruction and the annihilation of civilization. Digital capitalism, however, is not reliant on the energy matrix that propelled the industrial revolution in manufacturing. Google, and other sultans of digital rent, have removed themselves from the fossil-fuel race by making most of their activities – including energy-hungy server farms – reliant on renewable energy. Elon Musk is a Trumpian anti-union boss, but has self-evidently placed his bets on the emergence of a post-fossil-fuel infrastructure. Even e-commerce mogul (and fiercely anti-labor) Bezos will eventually rely on electric vehicles for the delivery of Amazon products to both warehouses and individual consumers. Nevertheless, his Washington Post remains staunchly anti-Trump (unlike Murdoch's Wall Street Journal), and Uber has had to swiftly reverse its initial support of the Muslim ban. The American entertainment industry will never give up on displaying hostility to Trump and Bannon’s illiberal agenda. Europe and Canada also remain firmly on the liberal side, although the former is besieged by nationalism, and the latter has strong fossil-fuel lobbies influencing its polity.

All this is to say that capital remains divided on Trump, both at home and abroad, and is amenable to social concessions that were unthinkable under conservative neoliberalism. Certainly, neoliberal elites are still in power in political and economic spheres – so much so that the battle for counterhegemony still needs to be won – but their influence is decreasing. Precarious labor and liberal sections of capital can strike a compromise on equality and openness, based on an expansion of liquidity and spending. The Jobsian compromise cannot be but conflictual, much like the Fordist one used to be, by intensely focusing on distribution issues in an expanding economy. The political viability of such a compromise is predicated on a major redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation of individuals and corporations, in order to fund basic income and free universal education, reducing the unbelievable concentration of global income that is currently in the hands of the 0.01%. The alternative to a reduction of inequality is national populism, and the destruction of democracy.

Social democracy gave flesh to the Fordist compromise by building collective bargaining institutions and universal welfare programs. Social populism should adopt a Jobsian strategy for implementing universal basic income against the backdrop of mass precarity caused by financialization and automation, for the universal diffusion and implementation of open knowledge through free lifelong public education and training, for a sharing economy that actually pays precarious workers for the value they create, for the provision of health care irrespective of employment status, for major public investment in rental housing, and finally for the provision of child care. Digital democracy in the political sphere and social unionism in the economic sphere can mutually reinforce each other, in order to milk the cow of informational capitalism while keeping at bay the big bad wolves of ExxonMobil and Goldman Sachs.

The objection to the thesis that precarious labor should fight, but also find compromise with, digital capital in order to save the world from national populism, and the destruction of the anthroposphere – that capitalism cannot be reformed – is well known. History, however, has shown that capitalism can in fact be reformed. Indeed, its malleability has enabled it to survive major crises and geopolitical shifts, and upheavals in all areas, from technological capabilities to gender politics. Democracy and universal suffrage, racial and gender equality before the law, the welfare state, and social security, were all imposed on capitalism by a powerful combination of popular pressure and labor conflict. The same will be true for universal income and redistribution of the digital dividend to the precarious social strata.

A stronger objection is that capitalism is inherently ecologically unsustainable, because it pursues endless accumulation, and therefore requires ever-larger quantities of energy to operate on a global scale. My contention is that only a particular historical-technological configuration of capitalism – carbon capitalism – is opposed to the interest of human life on Earth and thus not able to be reformed. Capitalism needs energy to function, yes, but this energy is not necessarily fossil energy from oil, gas, and coal. Solar energy has unlimited potential, and is quickly becoming able to seriously compete with fossil sources across the world (no matter how American executive power is presently fixated on appeasing the oil and coal lobbies). Therefore, a form of informational capitalism that thrives, while cutting carbon emissions to the level required to prevent catastrophic climate change, can exist, although its growth path is admittedly very narrow, given that loss of biodiversity, drinkable aquifers, and soil nitrification also need to be held in check, if the production and reproduction of civilization is to continue.

Paul Mason sees postcapitalism as emerging out of the organic growth of Yochai Benkler's peer-produced, open-source information economy.[[9]](#footnote-9) This seems an uncharacteristically non-Marxist ending, as oligopolists are unlikely to renounce their privileges without putting a fight. In the end, there is a class struggle to be won by the precariat, if the digital commons are to be secured as the basis of exchange and livelihoods. The very fact that postcapitalism has been chosen to replace anti-capitalism bespeaks of a vagueness of aspiration, and weakness of intent. Either we want to abolish capitalism and take part in anti-capitalist riots (a strong temptation, I admit), or we want to reform it drastically via a populist strategy involving mass civil disobedience and political mobilization. What we cannot do is simply claim postcapitalism is already here while we still exist under capitalism; this is simply an expression of our own powerlessness.

We have to recognize that the victory of national populism in the core country of the capitalist system, the one with most weapons and largest financial influence, poses a threat that is of a different order and magnitude than the one represented by the neoliberalism which we fought from 1999 (NO WTO) to 2011 (Occupy Wall Street). A populist strategy for the left would be to create a broad social front that can appeal to the liberal middle classes, while simultaneously satisfying the long-repressed needs of the popular classes. Yet today’s left lacks either the nerve, or the force, to make such a move. Thus, it will have to be the precariat itself that builds its own institutions with which to further its interests. Institutions are created to enable the repeated satisfaction of material needs reflecting certain political priorities. The precariat needs basic income to live free from fear, and unleash its creative power. It is crowdsourcing a new political and economic constitution after the degeneration of liberal democracy into oligarchy. The precariat must rise, so that the world can exit the Great Recession on a path leading to economic redistribution, social emancipation, and ecologically sustainable communities.

Neoliberal capitalism is the cause of the job crisis, and the ecological crisis. I believe that a replacement in the form of a socially regulated market economy is more likely to deliver what we need and want (the uprooting of the fossil economy, wealth redistribution, transnational solidarity, etc.), than either the violent overthrow of the capitalist state, or the highly probable ‘common ruin of the contending classes’[[10]](#footnote-10) – otherwise understood as environmental catastrophe.

## Discourses on the Ecological Question

The emergence of global warming as the single overarching problem confronting humankind – and the prevalent role of energy extraction and consumption, capitalist manufacturing, and mass consumerism in all of this – has vindicated the warnings made by the green movement since the institution of Earth Day in 1970.

Since then, greens have become part of the establishment, but also affected the way capitalism does business; companies ignore palm oil at their peril, because consumers will punish them for it. This was unheard of before green consumerism started growing in the 80s and 90s. In the late 00s, it seemed that everybody was going green, from Gore to Schwarzenegger, and Google to Toyota. A liberal response to the climate crisis seemed possible, but was repeatedly thwarted until the Paris Climate Conference of 2016. However, then rose Trump, who made petro-capitalism and the willful ignorance of climate science the backbones of his reactionary project.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reformist** | **Radical** |
| ***Prosaic*** | Technocratic  Pragmatism | Malthusian  Survivalism |
| ***Imaginative*** | Environmental  Sustainability | Green  Radicalism |

Table 13. Types of Environmental Discourse. Source: Dryzek (2005)

Green radicalism is the ideological discourse that mobilizes climate anarchists, engendering civil disobedience, unrest, and ecotage in the name of environmental justice. It is in itself a fairly wide spectrum, ranging from the NGO professionalism of Greenpeace to the militancy of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF); from Monbiot to Zerzan. In the middle of this spectrum are the growing climate action movements who provided the main thrust for the protests at the Climate Summits in Paris and Copenhagen. All of these movements share, to varying degrees, the belief that existing forms of politics and business are the root causes of the climate crisis. Changing individual behaviors, like Malthusians and United Nations sustainability drives advocate, is not enough. There needs to be a political drive to change the social infrastructure itself. Whilst those belonging to the sustainability approach want to make capitalism greener by changing its sectoral composition, technocrats merely want to make existing energy and manufacturing systems more efficient.

The emergence of green capitalism signals the diffusion of the concept of corporate sustainability, the key policy concept first put forward in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, which has become the platform of choice for European green parties and other environmental reformists. Green capitalism clearly markets sustainable development as a way out of the twin crises. However, sustainability is more concerned by the relative, rather than the absolute, impact of economic activity. It aims to provide incentives for companies to go green, but it is reluctant to measure whether basic ecological targets are indeed met ex post. The result of this attitude is that all carmakers are cheating on emission targets. Until now, all the talk about sustainability has just served to postpone the radical action needed to wean the economy off of fossil fuels.

Environmental malthusianism was inaugurated by The Limits to Growthreport, which, appearing in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, seemed to capture the essence of those times, only to be later shelved when the oil prices went back to levels equivalent to those before the second oil crisis in 1979. Today it is the ideology of the outspoken James Lovelock, and the implicit discourse of many IPCC[[11]](#footnote-11) reports, who correlate disaster in coastal regions with increases in global temperatures. The rhetoric is gloomy and survivalist, a ‘we have to do this, or most humans will be dead before the end of the century’ approach to bringing about sustainability – ‘only polar regions and large, rainy islands will host the remnants of humanity’, they proclaim. Many in this camp think that the backlog of emissions has already overstepped the critical threshold after which runaway climate change becomes certain – we just have to brace ourselves for when it happens. The creativity and imagination of the British climate camps, the Water Protectors at Standing Rock, or ecomovements like 350.org and Rising Tide, are missing from the minds of Malthusians. They care about objective constraints and cold estimates. Green radicals, however, believe in subjectivity, and collective possibilities for radical transformation. Still, if the survivalists are right, organizing for a post-apocalyptic society might be the only option left to the opponents of state hierarchy and corporate exploitation.

## Adverting Dystopia?

Obama's switch toward environmental keynesianism has changed the nature of the economic game, and Trump cannot reverse the process. Green capitalism is a reality, as Silicon Valley switches from chips to panels, and billions of dollars are invested in renewable energy and green jobs. Global solar power capacity soared by 50% last year due to rapid growth in America and China, and local produce, growing one’s own food, community gardens, and even permaculture are all the rage. The rich and famous are converting to green lifestyles. Hybrid and electric cars are no longer confined to the attention of green enthusiasts. Although the rise of Tesla rests on shaky financial foundations, internal combustion engines will soon disappear from the roads, as the Netherlands and a number of Northern European countries have instigated plans to phase them out of circulation in less than a decade.

A global network of organizations and collectives are animating the climate justice movement, and distilling a new DIY material culture centered around ecological education, sustainable living (minimization of eco-footprint through self-produced renewable energy, vegan food, water recycling, etc.), and non-violent mass direct action, successfully targeting the largest emitters of greenhouse gases, from Kingston to KeystoneXL.

In a 2009 article, The Ecologistquestioned whether climate campers were anarchists, or the best hope for the environmental movement.[[12]](#footnote-12) I would argue that they both. Pink queer and black anarchist influences are crucial to making the climate justice movement the most important heir of the anti-globalization movement, one in which libertarianism is kept alive against police repression, technocratic regimentation, and top-down decision-making. Only direct action ultimately affects power. In our current predicament, power to the people also means power generated by the people. The core struggle between climate justice radicals and petro-capitalists will determine whether, and how, drastic cuts in carbon emissions are made, and how the ecological redesigning of cities and their logistics (such as energy, transportation, and food production systems) is implemented, if at all. There is no other social conflict more important for the future of the world today. Green capitalists and climate anarchists arguably both seek the empathy and support of public opinion regarding a climate crisis whose existence both fronts acknowledge. The objective is to make the rest of society understand that global overheating is humankind’s top political priority. Ultimately, ‘less climate change, more social change’ (to quote a climate camp slogan), is what drives radical and reformist politics alike.

Today, oil interests still determine the direction of energy policy. If the ongoing climate conflict yields economic transformation, then the world might progress toward a carbon-neutral future, just as labor conflict made the world emerging from the ashes of fascism progress toward social reform, and welfare provisions. If instead green capitalism is too weak to confront fossil lobbies, and the climate justice movement fails to gain critical mass, then environmental collapse and eco-fascism are likely to carry the day, in a planetary-scale replica of what happened to the poor of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. I surmise that the present ecological crisis can lead to one, or a combination of, the following macro-political scenarios:

|  |
| --- |
| Eco-fascism |
| Steampunk Anarchy |
| Ecosocial Populism |
| Green Liberalism |
| Green Maoism |

Table 14: The Climate Question: Future Macro-Political Scenarios

If the biosphere becomes uninhabitable for much of the human species, a global war for resources is likely to ensue, leading to areas where military despots have absolute rule over the lives of the inhabitants – eco-fascism. In this nightmare scenario – a return, essentially, to feudalism ­– brutal overlords would rule over a present of misery, and a future of regression. Trump’s Nazi-populism could lead us to such a dystopian future. In such a setting, pockets of steampunk anarchycould survive, similar to when free cities in the Middle Ages managed to hold their own against the feudal lords, bishops, and monarchs. These will be self-managed communities, surviving - and perhaps thriving - through the recycling and hacking of old machinery, enabled by the transfer of pirate knowledge across generations. They will be under constant threat from eco-fascists and climate refugees, forced rewilders in a Hobbesian world where civilization (drinking water from taps, public health and schooling, internet, etc.) has collapsed. Those who fail to organize will either prey and / or perish, with eco-hacking providing an important edge for survival. Are primitivists cheering for the imminent collapse of electricity-based civilization? Sometimes it is best to not get what you wish for.

However, a utopian scenario also exists. Dystopia turned on its head, and remade into utopia. An ecosocial future for the seven (soon to be nine) billion human beings that people Gaia. A Green Deal that is in the interest of society, not corporations. A social pact that imposes the binding regulation of emissions to power plants, factories, and vehicles, which is enforced thanks to carbon pricing and the social control and pressure of active multitudes who are watchful of large emitters, and mindful of entrenched interests. Overdeveloped countries finance the technology needed in undeveloped countries to curb emissions. Viral experiments in urban and rural communities lead to distributed energy production, economic mutualism, and social ecologism. Green jobs are created to compensate those lost to automation in industry and mining. Regionalization of trade, and relocalization of food consumption also takes place.

A multipolar world leading to transnational human rights governance, where green and populist parties take on the role of the socialism of yesteryear. A society where barricades are burnt and conflicts occur – for access to water or knowledge, for instance – but ones that are managed and solved, through reform and compromise. A society where the economy starts to dematerialize, downshifting from material goods to immaterial leisure, as climate change unfolds slowly, but surely. The climate crisis thus becomes an occasion for catagenesis (to use Homer-Dixon’s expression), when the crisis becomes a green opportunity to change the structures of society. Environmental groups stand to become mass organizations in such a world. Climate action and opposition to green capitalism is likely to lead to ecosocial populism, not revolution. It was James O’Connor who first articulated the possibility of ecosocialism. However, I differ in one fundamental aspect from O’Connor, as I don’t wholeheartedly accept Marx’s labor theory of value, and thus do not assume that the ecological crisis will negatively affect profits, just as it was wrong to assume a trend toward impoverishment of the working-class, or that the accumulation of fixed capital would lead to falling rates of profit (the historical record says otherwise). Indeed, the possibility of green capitalism rests on the potential of a productivity boost, afforded by green technology that will allow both wages and profits to grow – the exact opposite of what O’Connor argues:

Put simply, the second contradiction states that when individual capitals attempt to defend or restore profits by cutting or externalizing costs, the unintended effect is to reduce the ‘productivity’ of the conditions of production and hence to raise average costs.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Global opinion remains in favor of green liberalism: technocrats, governments and international agencies overseeing the ecological modernization of the economy, by responding to, and reconciling the interests of, corporations and organized science. Lord Stern and Oscar-Nobel Gore have been the most credible salesmen of corporate capitalism’s ‘green face’. It is carbon trading and industrial innovation, not carbon taxes and sustainable living, as in ecosocialism. Sacrifices for the many, not the few. Yet any return to decent macroeconomic conditions requires redistribution from profits and rents, to wages and salaries as condicio sine qua non, if (im)material consumption is to resume, and green capitalism is to be kickstarted.

A final setting, largely hypothetical but within the realm of possibility, might be defined as Green Jacobinism, or ecomaoism. Imagine an Earth Liberation Army motivated by a radical green ideology, made up of disciplined cadres, which manages to defeat petro-capitalism in open battle, and subsequently conquer the world. It would set up an intransigent government dedicated to the strict regulation of economy and society, in order to halt climate change. This would be the revolutionary army that enables a party of radical ecologists to seize power, and then limit material production and consumption levels to stay within atmospheric limits. This revolutionary government would have one mission, and one mission only: reduce CO2 concentration in the atmosphere to 350ppm, the level at which mean global temperatures will not increase further than pre-industrial era averages. No person would be entitled to more than 3 tons of carbon dioxide emissions. Private possession of fossil fuels and internal combustion engines would be outlawed. Mountains of SUVs would be sent to the junkyards and their owners imprisoned, to show people the harsh rule of the new global government. Civilian air transport networks would be dismantled. Coal mines would be closed, gas production nationalized, and oil used only for pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals. Nuclear energy would be exploited until the Hubbert’s Peak of uranium is reached. Any form of unauthorized combustion would be actively discouraged, including smoking. Ecology and science education would be mandatory from an early age, which would further enforce nutrition, mobility, and power consumption regimes. Mandatory free labor in public parks, forests, and victory gardens would be required from every adult citizen. Paramilitary corps would be assigned to reforestation projects, and scout-like formations of green bio-engineers would oversee these projects with dictatorial powers limited only by the fear of causing an insurrection.

What to make of this scenario? In effect, it’s hard to see, without resorting to authoritarian measures, how to persuade producers and consumers to change their habits with the rapidity necessary to avert disaster (reducing emissions by 20-30% within a decade, and by 80% within forty years). It seems that only a benevolent planner, or a planetary salvation committee endowed with full powers, could achieve such a feat, and win over people who don't like to be bossed around, even if it is supposedly in the name of a good (green) cause.

## The End of Precarity

To briefly sum up before concluding. We are in the midst of both an economic, and ecological crisis, where class and climate struggles have become central to geopolitics. The social actors of the class struggle are new, since capitalism is no longer industrial, but informational. This struggle is between the budding precariat and the fossil-fuel elites. The precariat is the new historical social subject, and social populism and radical ecology shall be its ideological tenets.

In a networked information economy, it is the precarious, not the capitalists, that control the strategic means of production – the computing power of connected smartphones and PCs – and enable the production and distribution of information, culture, and knowledge, through networks which are making the age of mass media obsolete. Immaterial labor puts a new, non-market, and non-proprietary sector at the center of wealth creation. However, capitalist domination strongly resists the encroachment of peer-to-peer (p2p) cooperation on its hitherto unchallenged prerogatives – the ownership of ideas, the management of production, and the marketing of innovation – and political power, and is attempting to defend its proprietary interests against the growing commonalism of the precarious class.

The solution to the precarious question is not going to be found in the return to the speculative, over-indebted, overdeveloped, ecocidal, and unequal consumer economy of the recent past, but in the fight for a new economic and welfare system that is built around the environment, and the social needs of the precarious sectors of society. Redistribution can be achieved thanks to massive strike movements, the taxation of capital and carbon to pay for universal health and education, basic income for all adults, a 4-day working week, free access to online knowledge, economic incentives for commons-based peer production, subsidized green housing and green job initiatives (for all those wishing to work), the introduction of a socialized banking system to fund renewable energy and sustainable living projects, the promotion of urban and labor rights in the form of solidarity strikes, self-organization and self-unionization, and most of all an end the scandalous discrimination and persecution of immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The politics of the common and the struggle around commons – and especially of the most precious common of all, the atmosphere – starts with the collective defense and expansion of the urban commons of the precariat: social centers, radical associations, alternative theaters, people's kitchens, and community gardens. Social cooperation needs to find its own organizational resources and political strategies, in order to prevail over capitalist enclosures of immaterial assets, and the privatizations of social space.

The redistribution of wealth and power toward the precariat, the growth of immaterial knowledge, the cultural enrichment of society, and a massive expansion of the value of leisure, are all fundamental social preconditions for the horizontal re-design of the economy. This will make the economy socially empowering and ecologically resilient, by freeing up individuals’ time to pursue ecohacktive and permacultural activities; giving time and money back to precarious people will enable them to devise ways to repair society and the environment, and decide collectively about their own future, cutting the need for quick consumption and instant satisfaction. A strongly relational and solidaristic economy would fulfill many of the needs today obviated by individualized market transactions. The multigendered and multiethnic precariat can be the social driver for local low-carbon economies of cooperation, exchange, mutual aid, food, and energy production, and the cognitive precariat has so far been the core constituency of the climate justice movement.

## Is the Ecological Regulation of Capital Possible?

Green capitalism cannot be simply considered as a marketing ploy. It embodies the faction of the global bourgeoisie that understands the reality of climate change and of its own declining political legitimacy in the face of the banking crisis and the consequent end of neoliberal, monetarist hegemony. Capital now seeks a top-down, as opposed to bottom-up, form of regulation, in order to reconcile market forces with ecological imperatives and social needs. Fossil-fuel capitalism, on the other hand, is purely reactionary. It has long denied the existence of man-made planetary heating, and it is now lobbying to seize upon the spaces opened by geopolitical and ecological disasters. It has spawned the growth of an oil-military complex that is the biggest threat to the peace and welfare of humankind.

Fordist keynesianism was incredibly wasteful in terms of energy. Oil was made so cheap, and consumer goods so abundant, that the biosphere was ruined as a result. However, it would be wrong to look at the present ecological crisis as simply the crisis of industrial society. In fact, over the last three decades, informationalism has replaced industrialism as the dominant technological matrix of accumulation. Indeed, the failure of economies to transition from industrialism to informationalism (from the electrical engine to the electronic chip) is viewed by contemporary sociology as the structural reason behind the implosion of the Soviet Union. Now, the inherited neoliberal form of informational capitalism is morphing into green capitalism. The evidence for this is mounting: from Silicon Valley becoming a hotbed for solar energy, to green sectors, and huge battery plants. Industrialism is dependent on oil, coal, and other hydrocarbons in a way that informationalism is not. Steel needs coal, the internet does not. The problem with green capitalism is that the scale effect is likely to more than offset any improvements in energy intensity, thus emissions continue to rise. Left to its own instincts, green capitalism would be ecologically unsustainable; it needs to be socially regulated.

Yet, economic growth only has meaning if measured in monetary terms, not in physical terms. Thus, in principle, a social regulation of capital can be envisaged where there is growth in monetary terms (thus overcoming the economic crisis), but not in entropic terms (thus forestalling climate catastrophe). This would be a stage of the economy where immaterial growth becomes the norm, along with the maximization of collective knowledge and social well-being, rather than corporate profit or private wealth. An economy where people mostly exchange immaterial services, rather than material goods. In other words, a world where there is money to be made in the economy, because information-based, and green jobs are available in large numbers, and the paying of universal basic income checks by a central bank keeps the economy liquid.

Today, the call for décroissance has fallen on deaf ears, because it preaches parsimony to a population already impoverished by the global recession. The precarious must organize, across genders and ethnic groups, to create their own movement that fights for a larger slice of the pie. But if the pie is shrinking, as Latouche advocates – because people save more and consume less – many more will be made jobless, and the people will end up in an even more precarious condition than under neoliberalism.

It is true that capitalism is addicted to accumulation and growth. The recovery from the crisis can only occur if there are more euros, dollars, and yuans are put in the hands of those with less money and thus likely to spend it when given the opportunity: the poor and the precarious. Social regulation must ensure that this extra money is not spent on Amazon.com but in ways that are thermodynamically sound, and funding things such as sustainable mobility, local agricultural produce, reforestation, and renewable energy deployment. Social spending must be used to strengthen the networks of solidarity within and across generations and nations. Only generalized conflict can emancipate the precariat, and lead to sharp increases in environmental investment.

The distinction between bounded material growth and unbounded immaterial growth is useful when imagining a social scenario that progressively de-commodifies capitalism. Politically, this would also be a society where the aims of anarcho-syndicalists – who aim to construct a postcapitalist, egalitarian commonwealth – and eco-populists – who aim to create a society of peers, on a biodiverse planet, oriented around a thermodynamic understanding of redistribution – converge in a major transformation of capitalism. It is a social scenario where the autonomous, pirate, and queer practices of the immaterial precariat are able to defeat the reactionary offensive of petro-capitalism, and drive the ecological transition of the economy, where grassroots experimentation is encouraged, and regulation is horizontal and bottom-up, rather than vertical and top-down. To address both the economic and ecological crises, the precariat needs to push for a service-based, relational, commons-oriented peer-production economy, the aim of which is the growth of knowledge, leisure, and culture, as opposed to the growth of material wealth. This would be a society based on ecological remediation, immaterial accumulation, and the maximization of well-being among its participants, rather than on material opulence for a tiny minority of people.

The debate is open about whether green capitalism can be made ecologically sustainable. Ecomarxists, who believe in the labor theory of value, think that the ecological crisis entails a squeeze in the rate of surplus value, and thus reinforces the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. In algebraic terms, this means that S/V, the ratio between surplus and variable capital (wages and fuel), goes down. The rate of profit is equal to surplus value over total capital invested – C+V – which is turn the sum of fixed capital (machinery and equipment), and variable capital (wages and raw materials). As V rises, the rate of profit decreases (divide the numerator and denominator by V to verify it is so). The same occurs as K rises, which is the case originally considered by Marx.

Empirically, if productivity declines because of the ecological crisis, due to increases in the cost of energy or to the internalization (inclusion in the business cost of products and services) of the environmental damages caused by the economic process, then ecomarxists are correct, and green capitalism is unsustainable due to falling profits. If, conversely, the ecological crisis triggers a green technological revolution, the rate of profit can stay equal as wages rise, so that green capitalism can create its own demand. In simpler words, if green capitalism is just green washing, ultimately the ecological crisis will end up endangering capitalist accumulation, thus leading to the common ruin of today’s contending social classes: the global elite and the transnational precariat. If, on the other hand, green capitalism is the harbinger of a fourth industrial revolution – genomics and greenomics – productivity will rise, creating a favorable context for increases in wages and labor conditions, as well as ease political resistance to income redistribution via progressive taxation (when taxes hit the rich proportionally more than the poor; under neoliberalism taxation has instead been regressive). Another way of looking at this is to consider the fact that the price of a good is equal to the wage rate, divided by productivity (production per hour worked) and multiplied by one plus the rate of profit: the margin that rewards the entrepreneur, and pays interest to the banker. At constant prices, if productivity increases because of a rise in energy efficiency, either the wage rate rises or the rate of profit must increase (or a combination of the two).

Let’s consider a class-neutral theory of value – a mark-up price equation: P = w/ π (1 + r), where p is the price level, w is the hourly wage, π is hourly productivity, and r is the rate of profit. Introducing energy costs, the equation gets transformed into P = (w/ π) (1 + r)/( 1 – θpE), where θ is the energy requirement per unit of output, and pEis the relative price of energy (the price of energy divided by the general price level P) and 1 > θpE. If θ decreases because of a rise in energy efficiency, this has the same effect as an increase of productivity π: in order for prices to stay constant, either w or r must rise.

Contrary to what Marx predicted, improvements in wages and living standards have been made possible under capitalism thanks to the combination of technological innovation and social redistribution. Have these improvements come at the cost of bankrupting the biosphere? Yes, if social resistance to capitalism is not strong enough to decarbonize the economy. If movements lose the fight for climate justice, Earth might become like Venus. From the experience of the poor and precarious of New Orleans, we know the horrors that lie in store when climate disaster strikes a class-polarized urban society. The climate question conceals a social question, because the precarious stand to lose the most in the biocrisis. On the other hand, the precarious need to be empowered to be effective antagonists to global financial elites; only if they secure income and leisure, can they have the freedom to erect a postcapitalist society.

Precarious-to-precarious community solutions to urban habitats, energy, food production, and social housing, will have to become increasingly common as answers to unemployment and environmental crises. Whole cities can be redesigned by expanding self-organized groups of precarious ecohacktivists living from their collective labor, and the sharing of what is produced and exchanged in their social networks.

If climate movements lose the battle, and fail to decarbonize governments and corporations, then by the middle of this century coastal cities will drown. What is at stake is neither the survival of capitalism nor industrialism, but of digital civilization, and the promise of universal access to information, knowledge, and culture, that the switch to informationalism has made possible.

The climate crisis makes everybody precarious. The precariat must rise to the challenge to defend the environmental rights of all, as it fights in the cities of the world against racism, and for the emancipation of all from enforced precarity.

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