And now for something completely different?
Life in limbo?

We are trapped in a state of limbo, neither one thing nor the other. For more than two years, the world has been wracked by a series of interrelated crises, and they show no sign of being resolved anytime soon. The unshakable certainties of neoliberalism, which held us fast for so long, have collapsed. Yet we seem unable to move on. Anger and protest have erupted around different aspects of the crises, but no common or consistent reaction has seemed able to cohere. A general sense of frustration marks the attempts to break free from the morass of a failing world.

There is a crisis of belief in the future, leaving us with the prospect of an endless, deteriorating present that hangs around by sheer inertia. In spite of all this turmoil – this time of crisis when it seems like everything could, and should, have changed – it paradoxically feels as though history has stopped. There is an unwillingness, or inability, to face up to the scale of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence have failed. There was a shift in what we took for granted no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. That of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence have failed. There was a shift in what we took for granted no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. That of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence have failed. There was a shift in what we took for granted no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. That of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence have failed. There was a shift in what we took for granted no longer makes sense. There was a shift in what we took as read no longer makes sense. That of the crisis. Individuals, companies and governments have hunkered down, hoping to ride out the storm until the old world re-emerges in a couple of years. Attempts to wish the ‘green shoots’ of recovery into existence have failed. There was a shift in what we took for granted no longer makes sense.

CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE

And yet, something did happen. Recall those frightening yet heady days that began in late 2008, when everything happened so quickly, when the old dogmas fell like autumn leaves? They were an attack on this ‘demanding’ working class, to reinstate the original deal, addressing individuals directly as individuals. It was a middle ground that emerged out of ‘deviant’ desires, discourses and practices that looked for ways out of the existing one (the fear that unions had become too powerful, dissatisfaction with the drab uniformity of everything, paramilitarism, practices of corruption that compensated an over-regulated life), and as such were very much about individualisation. Indeed, it aimed at creating a certain kind of individual, an atomised self-entrepreneur whose collective social ties are subordinated to the search for private gain.

CRISIS OF THE COMMON

Today, the neoliberal deal is null and void; the middle ground has crumbled away. We’ve gone past the era when cheap credit, rising asset prices and falling commodity prices could compensate for stagnating wages. Those days are over but no new middle ground has cohered. Nobody has ‘agreed’ any replacement ‘Deal’ – on the contrary, we find ourselves in a state of limbo.

Mind you, deals and middle ground don’t necessarily go hand in hand. A new middle ground might result from a deal, explicit (like that of the New Deal of the 1930s) or implicit (like neoliberalism) – indeed, it will be firmer, more stable, if this is the case. But a new centre of the political field can also emerge without one. A middle ground does not require the degree of corporeal of the financial system, but the bailouts have been used to prevent change, not initiate it. We are trapped in a state of limbo.

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CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE

And yet, something did happen. Recall those frightening yet heady days that began in late 2008, when everything happened so quickly, when the old dogmas fell like autumn leaves? They were real. Something happened there: the tried and tested ways of doing things, well-rehearsed after nearly 30 years of global neoliberalism, started to come unstuck. What had been taken as read no longer made sense. There was a shift in what we call the middle ground: the discourses and practices that define the centre of the political field.

To be sure, the middle ground is not all that there is, but it is what assigns the things in the world around it a greater or lesser degree of relevance, validity or marginality. It constitutes a relatively stable centre against which all else is measured. The further from the centre an idea, project or practice is, the more likely it is to be ignored, publicly dismissed or disqualified, or in some way suppressed. The closer to it, the more it stands a chance of being incorporated – which in turn will shift the middle more or less. Neither are middle grounds defined from above, as in some conspiratorial nightmare: They emerge out of different ways of doing and being, thinking and speaking, becoming intertwined in such a way as to reinforce each other individually and as a whole. The more they have become unified ‘from below’ as a middle ground, the more this middle ground acquires the power of ‘unifying from above’. In this sense, the grounds of something like ‘neoliberalism’ were set before something named as such; but the moment it was named a qualitative leap: the point at which relatively disconnected policies, theories and practices became identifiable as forming a whole.

The naming of things like Thatcherism in the UK, or Reaganism in the US, marked such a moment for something that had been constituting itself for some time before, and which has for the past three decades dominated the middle ground: neoliberalism, itself a response to the crisis of the previous middle, Fordism/Keynesianism. The era of the New Deal and its various international equivalents had seen the rise of a powerful working class that had grown used to the idea that its basic needs should be met by the welfare state, that real wages would rise, and that it was always entitled to more. Initially, the centrepiece of the neoliberal project was an attack on this ‘demanding’ working class and the state institutions wherein the old class compromise had been enshrined. Welfare provisions were rolled back, wages held steady or forced downwards, and precariousness increasingly became the general condition of work.

But this attack came at a price. The New Deal had integrated powerful workers’ movements – mass-based trade unions into the middle ground, helping to stabilise a long period of capitalist growth. And it provided sufficiently high wages to ensure that all the stuff generated by a suddenly vastly more productive industrial system – based on Henry Ford’s assembly line and Frederick Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ – could be bought. Bit by bit, the ferocious attack on the working classes of the global North was offset by low interest rates (i.e. cheap credit) and access to cheap commodities, mass-produced in areas where wages were at their lowest (like China). In the global South, the prospect of one day attaining similar living conditions was promised as a possibility. In this sense, neoliberal globalisation was the globalisation of the American dream: get rich or die trying.

Clearly, neoliberalism also relied on a ‘deal’ of some kind. But the word here has a different meaning; its mode of attraction/ incorporation was quite unlike that of Fordism/Keynesianism. The latter involved visible, constituted collective forces through the likes of trade unions or farmers’ organisations; the former worked more as a boycott from the original deal, addressing individuals directly as individuals. It was a middle ground that emerged out of ‘deviant’ desires, discourses and practices that looked for ways out of the existing one (the fear that unions had become too powerful, dissatisfaction with the drab uniformity of everything, paramilitarism, practices of corruption that compensated an over-regulated life), and as such were very much about individualisation. Indeed, it aimed at creating a certain kind of individual, an atomised self-entrepreneur whose collective social ties are subordinated to the search for private gain.

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FROM MADNESS TO MAINSTREAM?

Until recently, anyone who suggested nationalising the banks would have been derided as a quack and a crank, as lacking the most basic understanding of economics and the functioning of a ‘complex, globalised world’. So strong was the grip of ‘orthodoxy’ that such an idea would have been disqualified without the need to offer a counter-argument. Yet over the past year, governments around the world have effectively nationalised large parts of the financial sector, while handing over dizzyingly large amounts of public money to those institutions that remained in private hands. Similar moves into the mainstream have taken place with the discourses around climate change and commons. Every ‘serious’ politician must at least appear to be concerned about global warming. And the ‘commons’, long an exclusive focus of the left, has also entered the vocabulary of centrist intellectuals and politicians: from widening recognition of the ‘public benefits’ of access to cheap drugs and other intellectual property, to cautiously approving comments in The Economist, and the economics profession’s faux Nobel prize going to Elinor Ostrom for her work on commons. Put these together and some might argue that the centre of gravity of public discourse has shifted to the left.

Yet it cannot escape notice that the recent nationalisations were argued for precisely on the grounds that they are necessary to save financialised capitalism, not as part of a social democratic programme of redistribution, let alone a strategy for a socialist transition. Likewise, the new green economy that is now on politicians’ public agendas aims to maintain a big business, productive model of development by marrying it to more environmentally sustainable energies and processes.

So things have changed, but, trapped in limbo, the extent of change is by no means obvious. Let us be clear, then, about where things have started to happen. Perhaps the most obvious change is at the level of what can be said — what can be accepted as valid argument, rather than being consigned to a wilderness inhabited by raging ideologues, and the ignorant. In its heyday, neoliberal ideology was effective in banishing all other thought because it posed as non-ideological, as merely the ‘reason-able’ application of the ‘science’ of utility. Today, however, it is possible to see (and say) that the presuppositions of these reasonable decisions were, of course, ideological. The market does not tend toward equilibrium, the maximisation of self-interest can override instincts of self-preservation and lead to sub-optimal outcomes, and in times of crisis any trickle down is reverted into the upstream spurge of bailouts. The premises of those supposedly non-ideological arguments — such as the transformation of ‘the market’ into a natural given governed by scientific laws available to ortho-do (‘correct opinion’) but not hetero-do (‘other opinion’) economists — have now been debunked. Hardcore neoliberal ideology will cease to shape the space of politics by defining its terms, what is good and bad (investment rather than public spending, efficient private versus inefficient public; markets not planning), and pulling the centre of gravity of the debate towards itself. Neoliberal orthodoxy no longer forms the middle ground of politics in regard to which all other opinions have to position themselves.

ZOMBIE-LIBERALISM

But does the disappearance of the ideological middle ground mean that the neoliberal era is actually over? Or is this just a pause, a kind of radical diet to shed inefficient capital and institutions, in order for neoliberalism to emerge leaner and meaner at the other end? On the one hand, rather than the banking system being restructured, and financial capital being subordinated to political direction, the recent bailout mania has simply been a massive robber-baron-style plunder of public resources, exacerbating 30 years of neoliberal upward redistribution of wealth. On the other, this major heist has lost its ideological justification, and been revealed as just that: theft. Neoliberalism has always had two sides. It was both a counterattack by elites against social gains won by workers’ and other movements from the 1930s onwards, an attempt to shift wealth back up the social ladder; and an ideological project claiming to rid ‘the markets’ of unwarranted intervention by governments and their ilk.

What remains of neoliberalism once the ideological pudding comes off? It is no longer a (relatively) coherent political-economic programme: it has become the plunder of a retreating army, a way of booby-trapping the political system so that it has to relinquish control over it. But these booby traps, even if stripped of their ideological camouflage, are dangerous and deadly. In all the countries that have seen bailouts and/or financial crises, the enormous government deficits created are now being used by exactly those social forces that most benefited from them (in absolute terms) to argue that they should be paid off through yet more rounds of austerity and spending cuts. By handing over control to some ‘safe hands’ outside any form of accountability, neoliberalism gets locked in. A neat trick: the financial sector uses the debts incurred bailing it out to secure continued control over policy.

The picture is confusing, and gets even more so. As credit dries up and food and energy prices rise, workers are left underpaid and, in the North, over-indebted – a so-called recovery that doesn’t massively increase wages and/or cancel personal debt will not change that. Deal’s off, as it were. But if there is no more deal, and no more ideology, what of the social basis of neoliberalism — the neoliberal power bloc? In short, it is in disarray, if not totally shattered. There is no longer any social group that can credibly claim ‘leadership’ in society, politics, culture or the economy. ‘The centre cannot hold’, the middle ground is broken, leaving behind a confused and vicious army, institutions no longer guided by a coherent framework, political parties still vying for power but without any real programmes.

So if the power bloc is weak, engaged in obvious, large-scale looting of the system it used to run, and if – above all – the ideological core of neoliberalism is gone, why is a new middle ground failing to emerge? Why is the apparent discursive shift to the left not paying off in practical terms? The answer lies at least partly in the fact that the neoliberal project relied a lot less on ideology than its critics tended to think. Theories and ideologies are used to create neoliberal ideologues and activists, but persuasion through argument isn’t how it transforms our subjectivities and the limits of what we perceive possible. These changes are brought about more operationally than ideologically, that is,
through interventions into the composition of society, whether to expose and challenge material processes or to bring about the social reality that its ideology claims already exists. It attempts to create its own presuppositions.

Rather than being persuaded by the power of neoliberal arguments, people are trained to view themselves as individual benefit-maximisers, those elusive creatures of economic theory. This training takes place through a forced engagement with markets, in both public and private activities, but in every sphere of our lives: in education, health care, child care, you name it. Take the meals that school children are given. An army of government inspectors and statisticians compiles mountains of data on schools' performance; parents, for their part, are expected to use this information to make the best decision regarding school choice. Education is seen as preparing bodies for the labour market, so ‘rational choice’ is invoked to justify the channeling of certain students into vocational training from an early age. Meanwhile, many ‘middle-’ or ‘lower-middle’ class parents locked in competition with others – an isolated atom entirely responsible for itself. In this context, accepting the individual ‘deal’ offered by neoliberalism made sense. Neoliberalism isn’t – or wasn’t – just about changes in global governance or how states should be managed, it’s about the management of individuals, about how you should live. It set up a model of life, and then established mechanisms that shepherded you towards ‘freely’ choosing that manner of living. The dice are loaded. Today, if you want to participate in society, you have to behave as Homo economicus.

In many ways it is this neoliberal coding, not just of public institutions and policy programmes, but of our very selves, that keeps us trapped in neo-liberalism. Neoliberalism is dead but it doesn’t seem to realise it. Although the project no longer ‘makes sense’, its logic keeps stumbling on, like a zombie in a Hollywood movie: ugly, persistent and dangerous. If no new middle ground is able to cohere and accept it, then this situation could last a while. All the major crises – economic, climate, food, energy – will remain unresolved; stagnation and long-term drift will set in (recall that the crisis of Fordism took longer than the entire decade, the 1970s, to be resolved). Such is the ‘unfreedom’ of a zombie, a body stripped of its goals, unable to adjust itself to the future, unable to make plans. A zombie can only act habitually, continuing to operate even as it decomposes. Isn’t this what we find ourselves doing, in the world of zombie-liberalism? The body of neoliberalism stagnates on, but without direction or teleology. Any project that wants to stay this zombie will have to operate on many different levels, just as neoliberalism did, which means that it must be tied to a new manner of living. And it must start from the here and now, the current composition of global society, large parts of which are still in the grip of the neoliberal zombie. This is the greatest challenge facing those advocating a New or Green New Deal. It isn’t a case of simply changing elite thinking or dabbling with government spending: it requires a more fundamental change. Not just a change of consciousness – of society, but a transformation of the social body.

The Middle and the Common

We can detect many symptoms of the waning of the old middle ground. In a way, this is where the significance of the Obama phenomenon lies: a political project that comes to power on a tide of vague promises of ‘hope’ and ‘change’ speaks less of the strength of its own ideas than of the weakness of others. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, we have seen the collapse of the parliamentary left in a number of recent elections. Whether in or out of power, Europe’s centre-left parties have been punished at the ballot box, while the vote for the right has generally held up better. Many have been mystified as to why the centre-left has taken the blame for the economic crisis, but the left that embraced neoliberalism became the toast of believers: it was they who came to see it as a progressive force that could bring development even to the world’s poor. (There is never a greater zealot than a convert.) It is the obliteration of this illusion that has led to the neoliberal left’s collapse.

So does that mean that the many left-wing critics of neoliberalism (and, sometimes, capitalism), from the radical left to the former-globol-conservative Seattle and Genoa, can now simply bask in a self-satisfied glow? They can now claim to have been right all along in opposing not only the neoliberal triad of financialisation, deregulation and privatisation, but also the Blairite Third Way? We count ourselves amongst these critics, and we have certainly been right about some of these things – the instability of the neoliberal credit system, say. But one of the worst mistakes we could make right now would be to assume that old answers and certainties are still valid. With the disappearance of the old, anti-neoliberal common ground, and the emergence of new struggles, we must not only revisit the question of who ‘we’ are (or were). We must also construct a new ‘we’. We need a new attentiveness to emerging responses to the present conjuncture. We need a strategy for a socialist transition, capacity to recognise at what levels these responses communicate and an active effort to identify the points where they overlap and reinforce each other. In other words, we need – collectively – to create, identify and name new common grounds.

The work of naming a common ground is for the most part analytic: it seeks to identify the components and directions of different trajectories, and to act back on them to strengthen commonalities, work through tensions that can be resolved, recognise the sources of those that can’t. Of course, the act of naming something as a common ground always entails proposing a partial synthesis. That is why this synthesis can only be as effective as the depth of the analysis that underpins it. It only works to the extent that what it names means something to those to whom it speaks.

Common grounds, like middle grounds, have a double character. On the one hand they have an ‘objective’ side: diverse processes, subjectivities and projects may share common aspects, or even resonate with one another, even if the one is unaware of the other. On the other hand, common grounds may have a subjective side, which requires a certain self-awareness and the ability to recognise what’s common in other struggles or projects. The ‘one no’ rejection of neoliberalism is an obvious example of a self-awareness, while the ‘up to now’ statement that accompanies it takes an active effort to identify common grounds, but identifying and maintaining them helps make them more effective. This self-awareness creates a feedback loop that can allow the common ground to gain consistency and exceed the established middle ground’s ability to contain it. Common grounds contain an element of autonomy, asking their own questions on their own terms.

This leads to the next question: how do common grounds affect middle grounds? To begin with, this often occurs in ways that are invisible to anyone confronting the middle ground’s centripetal pull. They are new practices and ways of living and thinking that deviate from the mainstream, but are necessarily becoming a visible challenge to the middle. Think of the many hidden struggles of factory or office workers that slow down the pace of work without organizing an strike; the impact on society of gays and lesbians carving out of niches for their desires; of the dynamic religions of Latin America and Africa, where indigenous and slaves practised their traditions right under the nose of the colonisers. Think of the advent of the pill and the way it gave women more power over their own bodies, producing mutations in sexual relations, in social roles and identities. Such phenomena become visible when they rub up against the middle ground, coming into conflict with existing institutions and practices. Common grounds problematise the way that the middle ground has composed the world, posing problems that it can’t get to grips with. The effects of such common grounds and the mutations they produce can still be limited, and are often accompanied by palliatives or forms of repression. Common grounds become more powerful and their effects more pronounced when they are

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Globalize Liberation

Empire, imperialism, neoliberalism, etc.) and its impacts on our communities can recognised as part of a larger resistance. Breaking those efforts cumulative. The concept of a single ‘movement’ focused on the ‘issue’ of corporate globalisation is used by the corporate media, as well as left writers, often in an attempt narrow the movement of movements, to marginalise its ideas or to declare the movement dead.

The same is now true of the ‘climate justice’ movement of movements and practices. Common grounds composed of convergence against the system. It can become a space of convergence for all of us who fight the day-to-day economic and political struggles that create climate change (and offers false solutions to it). Or we can let it become a space in which all movements focused on the ‘issue’ of climate change.

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ANALYSE THIS!

What were we wrong about ten years ago, when our mass direct action shut down the Seattle WTO summit? I’d say we missed articulating and sharing lessons, and allowed our movement of movements to be narrowly defined and contained. After those protests many of us went full steam into the next round of organising. We did not take the time out to analyse what had worked, what had not, and why. And now, a long and ongoing series of mass actions in the US is missing the lessons that hundreds of organisers could have provided. As radical researcher Paul De Armond writes in his outsider analysis of the 1999 week-long battle, Black Flag Over Seattle, Law enforcement, government authorities and the American Civil Liberties Union have conducted instructive after-action analyses of the Battle of Seattle. By way of contrast, none of the protest organisations has rendered an after-action analysis of the strategies and tactics used in Seattle, even though the Internet teems with eyewitness accounts. In all forms of protacticed conflict, early confrontations are seedbeds of doctrinal innovation on all sides.

Many movements and networks converged in Seattle and, as they swarmed around the WTO in their ad hoc and accidental alliances, they opened up a space. But we allowed this space to become narrowly defined as the ‘anti-globalisation’ or ‘global justice movement’. There is no global justice movement. At best, ‘global justice’ is a common space of convergence – a framework where everyone who fights against the system of corporate globalisation (or capitalism,
TOWARDS NEW COMMON GROUNDS

But while we might appear to be trapped in limbo, history is still being made. In the last few years we have seen the eruption of a multiplicity of struggles, some more visible than others. In parts of the global North a direct action movement against climate change and for climate justice has emerged and grown rapidly. There’s been an increase in political activity around universities – such as the wave of occupations and strikes across Italy against the country’s Education Reform Bill, and mass protests against the raising of tuition fees and job losses at the University of California. In some cases, protest movements have emerged around issues directly connected to the financial crisis, for example, in Iceland, Ireland, France (remember ‘boum-boum-boum’?) or, as in Greece, they have tapped into the widespread social malaise concerning the lack of prospects for the ‘700-euro generation’. In Latin America, seriously the part of the world where left forces are most ascendant, there have been explosive indigenous struggles around the control of natural resources. Indigenous people in Peru successfully confronted the government and its army to prevent the destruction of forests and livelihoods in the pursuit of new sources of oil. Elsewhere, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta has fought the Nigerian army to a standstill and disrupted several of Shell’s operations in the area. In South Korea, sacked workers occupying the Stangdong car plant in Seon forced pitched battles with the police and army, only to be dislodged after a massive security operation.

While the list could go on and on, it is hard to avoid the impression that these struggles have remained relatively separate from each other. By and large, they have not resonated sufficiently to constitute new common grounds. But: we can be certain on a few points and, from our power to shape the outcome of the here, it may be possible to identify some emergent tendencies. First and foremost, we know that in an epochal crisis such as this one, both middle and new common grounds will initially have to emerge around the problematics that brought the old era to its knees.

Take the world of Fordism. By the 1970s, not only had persistently high wages led to a crisis of profitability, there were also widespread fears that unions had become too strong, the state too expansive and too bureaucratic, life too uniform. The success of the neoliberal project, at least in its Anglo-American heartlands, lay partly in the fact that it effectively tackled these problems, that it captured previously ‘deviant’ desires, disciplines and practices by promising individuals the ability to realise them. When neoliberalism crushed the unions, shrank the welfare bureaucracy, ended stagnation around inflation, it won on the one hand effectively addressed the problems that brought the old New Deal to its knees, and on the other, laid the groundwork for a new set of systemic problems to emerge.

The first, most immediately obvious, problematic apparent in the crisis of neoliberalism appears very different, depending on where you are standing. What from the top looks like an ‘economic crisis’ (not enough growth, not enough profits, not enough demand) is experienced, from below, as a ‘crisis of social reproduction’. Unemployment is soaring and national defi cits are placing ever-greater constraints on social security. The ‘zombie-liberal’ response has been ultimately self-defeating: bail out the banks and some well-connected industries (but at huge cost to governments, increasing defi cit spending), try to re-inflate the bubble of cheap credit, and hope that someone will borrow the money that is made available. Alas, there is no source of mass demand, no consumer of last resort, no new large-scale investment opportunities. Along this road lies nothing but future ruin.

Taking these perspectives on the same crisis obviously call forth two different ‘logical’ responses. While the reaction of zombie-liberalism makes sense according to its own (undead) logic, the logical response to the crisis of social reproduc-

\[\text{ction is perhaps a strategy of commoning. This would be a defence and expansion of resources held in common and accessible to all: expanding public transport, socialising health care, guaranteeing a basic income, and so on. This type of strategy would achieve two linked and essential goals. First, it would address our immediate fear of losing our livelihoods – because it would create spaces where social reproduction becomes possible outside the crisis-ridden circuits of capital. Second, it would counteract the atomisation caused by three decades of neoliberal subjectivisation in markets – just as economic crisis cynically tends to create market-subjects, engaging in commoning tends to create ‘commonist’ subjec-

ives. And if another, equally ‘logical’, response to the economic crisis is the attempt to exclude certain people from collective resources, then the creation of open commons as a response to the crisis of social reproduction would counteract this, too. Open commons would undermine the nativist, racist politics that are gaining ground, certainly in Europe, and in parts of Africa and Asia.}

A second central problematic is that of the ‘ecopolitical’ and socio-ecological crises that are currently afflicting the world as a result of the contradiction between capital’s need for never-ending growth and the fact that we live on a finite planet. Again, the biocrisis has two faces. From the perspective of governments and capital, it looks like an emerging threat to social stability. Climate change is undermining livelihoods, which increases the number of people forced to seek their reproduction through some form of ‘climate refugees’. Large-scale movements of ‘climate refugees’ are feared by many governments. Piracy is a response by Somali fisherfolk and others to ‘foreign’ interference in their waters. But states and capital also perceive precisely these threats to social stability as opportunities to re-legitimise political authority, to expand government powers and to kick-start a new round of ‘green’ economic growth, fuelled by uranium and biodiversity.

But the biocrisis, as the same implies, is one that threatens life; and disproportionately the lives of those who have done the least to cause it. Increasingly, the contradictions stemming from this contradiction – between capital and life, growth and limits – are doing so around the ‘climate crisis’. The idea that responses to the crisis should undo rather than exacerbate existing injustices and imbalances of power, and that their construction should involve the direct participation of those affected. Of course, we cannot be sure that new middle and common grounds will emerge around either of these issues – the economic-crisis/crisis of social reproduction and the biocrisis – but we can be certain that any new project will need to address both.

FROM COMMONS TO CONSTITUTIONS

Allowing a new common ground to emerge involves a moment of grace, a stepping back from the assumptions, tactics and strategies of the anti-neoliberal, counter-globalist protest cycle of the turn of the century. The common ground constructed and maintained from that period must be re-composed through the prism of our contemporary situation.
able are undoubtedly the constituent processes in Bolivia and Ecuador, which have resulted in political constitutions that represent radical innovations not only in relation to the countries’ histories, but to constitutional law itself. First of all, because they give a form to a new arrangement of forces in which, for the first time in their history, the vast majority of the population actually has a voice, and some degree of representation. More than that, however, in instituting pluri-nationality as a principle of the state, both of them signal a remarkable break with modern notions of sovereignty by recognising multiple, autonomous sovereign forms within the state itself, as well as acknowledging the end of history’ doctrine. While emphatically opposing the neoliberal model, the aleglob- alism cycle seemed to accept the premise in reverse form: institutions were not subject to change. But rejecting institutions as such does not necessarily mean rejecting institutions as we-know-them. But these constitutions can only be a beginning, in a way, it is only when they are written that the real constituent process begins: that of filling the letter of the text with real transformation. This, indeed, is the real Latin American ‘Pink Tide’ will have to confront very soon: it is not so much in an increasingly organised basis (see Honduras), but in the future of its own most-vaunted success stories, that the question mark lies. Of course, this is also a matter of new middle and common grounds: a question of how far from the old middle ground these processes can move, and what new common grounds will have to be constructed in order to affect them. The recent experiences in Latin America have been, remain, contradictory: the recognition of ‘the rights of nature’ and ‘the good living’ goes hand-in-hand with a resurrection of ‘developmentalism’, increased exploitation of natural resources, and a renewed emphasis on primary commodity exports. The question is: have the dominant powers, the existing movements been entirely spent in this process? Is the coming time one of consolidating gains instead of raising the game – of tactical rearguard manoeuvres rather than strategic movements? In Brazil, as in Bolivia, Venezuela etc., will new dynamics below the state level rekindle the transformative energy that created the present situation, or will we see its cooling off and crystallisation? How relevant are these processes, and these questions, to those of us outside Latin America? In many ways the cont- inent, with its distinctive bridge to social movements’ common ground, seems like an anomaly. Indeed its anomalous status is perhaps a symptom of neoliberalism’s breakdown. Most of the world faces very different symptoms and a different set of questions: if zombie-lib- eralism is an ongoing form of governance, then how can social movements affect the wider world? If there is no dominant middle ground for emergent common grounds to rupture, where will struggles made visible? How do we form an antagonism against an incoherent enemy? If neoliberalism is to continue to be reproduced then how do we interrupt this process and create new subjects with expanded horizons?

However, many current struggles are also premised on the idea that zombie-liberalism won’t persist and a new middle ground will emerge. Just think of the movements around climate change where the battle is not only against inaction but simultaneously against the manner in which the problems are framed and the solutions being offered. From this perspective the Latin American anomaly can seem like an outlier, a potential motto and its problematics can suddenly seem timely. This is the true difficulty of acting in a crisis. When the future is so unclear we must operate in different worlds at once. We must name a common ground, while keeping it open to new directions. We must look for institutional interloc- ures while accepting that, in part, we will have to create them ourselves. We must set the conditions for a new middle ground to emerge while not getting trapped.

These are all, of course, difficult tasks but it is how a ‘we’ is constructed. The smallest step may seem near impossible now, but we should remember that once a new common ground begins to take shape, things can move very quickly. Such is the fragility of the current state of things that a little movement could have a dramatic effect. It may not take too much to tip a world gripped by entropy into a world full of potential. Turbulence December 2009
Crisis in California: Everything touched by capital turns toxic

The United States’ most populous state, California is the world’s eighth largest economy. The state has some of the planet’s most productive farmland and in the 1990s enjoyed an extensive real-estate boom. But intensive, industrialised agriculture has polluted much of the environment and now, with more foreclosed homes than anywhere else in the world, it is also home to a growing number of tent cities. Gifford Hartman takes us on a road trip through California’s Central Valley to witness the toxicity of mortgages and ecosystems, houses, drugs and human relations.

I should be very much pleased if you could send me something (merry) on economic conditions in California... California is very important for me because nowhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist centralisation taken place with such speed.

– Letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Sorge, 1880

SHANTYTOWN USA

In California toxic capitalist social relations demonstrated their full irrationality in May 2009 when banks bulldozed brand-new, but unsold, McMansions in the exurbs of Southern California. Brand-new, but unsold, McMansions in reality in May 2009 when banks bulldozed relations demonstrated their full irrationality. SHANTYTOWN USA

Mayor Johnson there by chance. Johnson we met with Governor Schwarzenegger and we visited in March 2009 to investigate, mayor of Sacramento, shut it down. When California’s governor, and Kevin Johnson, California’s state capital, was set up on the Great Depression of the 1930s. ’Hoovervilles’ – similar structures, named up in the burgeoning tent cities that are dwellers desperately wanted to be working and wanted to be housed. In many places people creating tent encampments are met with hostility, and are blamed for their own condition. New York City, with a reputation for intolerance towards the homeless, recently shut down a tent city in East Harlem. Homeowners near a tent city of 400 in Tampa, Florida organised to close it down, saying it would ‘devalue’ their homes. In Seattle, police have removed several tent cities, each named ‘Nickelville’ after the Mayor who ordered the evictions. Yet in some places, like Nashville, Tennessee, tent cities are tolerated by local police and politicians. Church groups are even allowed to build showers and provide services. Other cities that have allowed these encampments are: Champaign, Illinois; St. Petersburg, Florida; Lacey, Washington; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Reno, Nevada; Columbus, Ohio; Portland, Oregon. Ventura, California, recently changed its laws to allow the homeless to sleep in cars and nearby Santa Barbara has made similar allowances. In San Diego, California, a tent city appears every night in front of the main public library downtown.

California seems to be where most new tent cities are appearing, although many are covert and try to avoid detection. One that attracted overflowing crowds is in the Los Angeles exurb of Ontario. The region is called the ‘Inland Empire’ and had been booming until recently; it’s been hit extremely hard by the wave of foreclosures and mass layoffs. Ontario is a city of 175,000 residents, so when the homeless population in the tent city exploded past 400, a residency requirement was created. Only those born or recently residing in Ontario could stay. The city provides guards and basic services for those who can legally live there.

TOXIC TOUR ALONG HIGHWAY 99

And so, for all the bravado about the state’s leading industry [agriculture] – about the billions of dollars that it adds to the economy and the miracles of production and technical ingenuity that it has accomplished – California’s farming is on the way out, as the rising value of its soil produces more in [real estate] lot sales than in cotton, cattle, or oil. A linear city of shopping malls, housing developments, and office parks spreads from the Bay Area to Sacramento and beyond, and another along Highway 99 from Sacramento to Bakersfield on the east side of the San Joaquin [Valley].

– Gary Brechin, Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream

California’s Central Valley is 720km long and 100km wide, sitting between the Sierra Nevada and Coast Range mountains. Its two main rivers are the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, which run through the northern and southern parts, giving their names to the valley’s two sections. The two rivers join in a massive delta that flows into the San Francisco Bay. It is the most productive agricultural region in the world where, since the 1970s, developers have been piling over fertile soil to build massive tract-style suburban and exurban housing.

For years, the monocultural practices of highly centralised agribusiness have been polluting ecosystems with a toxicity that spreads environmental damage beyond the region. More recently, the mortgages financing the new homes have become the toxic assets polluting social relations. In the midst of the world’s richest farmlands, the Central Valley probably has more foreclosed homes than anywhere else in the world. Historically, some parts of the Valley have had the lowest wages in the US and some of the highest rates of unemployment outside the Midwestern ‘Rust Belt’. The Valley competes with the Los Angeles basin for the worst air quality in the US. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the town of Arvin – immortalised in John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath for the government-funded migrant workers camp called ‘Weedpatch’ – has the dirtiest air in the country.

Interstate 80 is the second-longest highway in the United States, traversing the country from San Francisco in California’s Bay Area to the suburbs of New York City. Driving east along Interstate 80 from the Bay Area, chaotic, unplanned suburban sprawl has replaced farmland for nearly all of the 140km to Sacramento. There are a few breaks when the terrain is hilly and a few crop fields have survived, but otherwise all you see are long strips of strip-malls: shopping malls, endless rows of tract homes, auto-mobile and recreational boat dealerships...
and unstable, and it has relied on migrant labour since the Gold Rush of 1849. Right now 94% of agricultural workers are immigrants. Chinese workers—often derogatorily referred to as ‘Coolies’—were brought to build the railroads where the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, they worked in mining until racism and declining yields drove them off. Many ended up labouring in the fields until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented further immigration, and also resulted in many Chinese being driven out of rural areas into urban ghettos. Growers then turned to Japanese, Filipino, Armenian, Italian, and Portuguese immigrants, as well as migrants from the Punjab region and beyond. During the Great Depression of the 1930s they employed ‘Okie’ and ‘Arkie’ refugees from the Dust Bowl—native-born white migrants, mostly former sharecropper or tenant farmers from Oklahoma and Arkansas. Mexican immigrants have also been used for this work and they, along with Central Americans, have become the overwhelming majority of agricultural workers today.

**One Big Union**

California also has a history of struggle. It’s where the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or ‘Wobblies’) waged a successful six-month Free Speech Fight in 1910–11. The tactic attracted several hundred ‘bulegan’ (illegal) housing for commuters, of some who endure a two-hour each-way drive to the Bay Area. Continuing south through Merced—with the second highest ‘official’ unemployment rate of any US city—there’s yet more malls and chain stores, but also reminders of the past: a few orchards and livestock pens along the highway, as well as dealers in tractors and other farm machinery. You can also see the plentiful irrigation canals that move water from the wet north to the Valley’s dry southern end. What is striking is how much of the industrial and agricultural infrastructure appears to be rusting away. Many plants display huge ‘For Sale’ signs. Two hundred and seventy kilometres south of Sacramento, the next big city is Modesto—the first big city you reach after Sacramento is the city and along the highways.

**Politics, Movements and Institutions**

Ten years ago I was writing about the movements that would shortly afterwards come together in the organisation of the World Social Forum. The scream of capitalism had been heard, and the strength of peasant movements such as the MST and mobilisations like the one in Seattle made it possible to launch a global opposition to the WTO. In the WSF, it seemed that the ensemble of forces that could lead the process of overcoming neoliberalism was becoming organised. However, we ran up against the hegemony of NGOs and a limited, reductionist concept of ‘civil society’. The protagonists heard, and the strength of peasant movements such as the MST and mobilisations like the one in Seattle made it possible to launch a global opposition to the WTO. In the WSF, it seemed that the ensemble of forces that could lead the process of overcoming neoliberalism was becoming organised. However, we ran up against the hegemony of NGOs and a limited, reductionist concept of ‘civil society’. 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California gold enabled the world economy to recover during the age of revolution in Europe and it fired the rapid urban industrial expansion across the United States

Some of the bigger builders, like Lennar, are ripping out the drywall and repairing some of the homes they built. But others have gone bankrupt, or are on the verge of collapse, and have done nothing. Most banks have refused to renegotiate or adjust loans on these toxic homes, leaving their buyers trapped. Beyond these doubly toxic walls lie the Fresno tent cities, which are plagued by a high level of drug use, particularly meth–as ‘being brain damaged’, ‘Methhead’ or ‘crystal meth’. Across the working-class areas of Fresno, the use of this addictive drug is so high that in the words of local health workers as having reached ‘epidemic’ proportions. The Central Valley was the birthplace of the modern illicit form of crystal meth production and distributed by biker-gangs like the Hell’s Angels. The biker drug networks were mostly broken by the police in the early 1990s, only to be replaced by Mexican drug cartels using even more rationalised international systems of production and distribution. The Central Valley and Fresno is key to meth production not only because of the large-scale operators, but also the tens of thousands of smaller drug producers, all of whom admit their own brains have been damaged by the toxic chemicals to produce the drug, the resulting despairing, spreading meth to the working class beyond the Central Valley, making it one of the most popularly abused drugs in the world today. The documentary features meth-users decrying ‘cookers’, those who actually mix the toxic chemicals to produce the drug, as ‘being brain damaged’. Meanwhile, many admit their own brains have been damaged by use of the drug which is sometimes consumed by those as young as 11. Some families contain multigenerational users, and many have been destroyed with increased incidences of domestic violence. The Central Valley around Bakersfield, the county seat, as the core of this drug, originally produced and distributed...
On the history of actually-existing failure

In the hour of defeat, the Soviet Union scores one final applause. In the moment of its failure, in foregoing revenge and unnecessary bloodshed, it renues one last time that peaceful and humanist utopia that forms the core of Marxist ideology and that has been so besmirched by the Bolsheviks during their time in power.

— Rainer Bohn, 1991

Measured against their promise to end exploitation and oppression, and to enable everybody to lead a life without hunger or identity cards, they all failed – the lefts. First of all, those who – usually rather furtively – reneged on this promise, or betrayed it. That is, social democrats of all hues: red, green or something in between. And no matter whether they were organised as a party, a trade union or an alliance of different politics, victories and betrayers, from the tentative attempts to break open the incrustations of bureaucracy that began in 1989. Only four years later, in August 1991, Yeltsin proscribed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, thus accelerating the foreseeable end of the USSR. Another window had closed out of what the (anti-)German journalist Wolfgang Pohrt called the ‘very old and ultimately dull game, whose variations are called exploitation, oppression and war’.

In his User Manual for the Past, Enzo Traverso pointed out that the ‘end of history’ also transforms the politics of memory and history. In the GDR, those who had been persecuted by National Socialism were divided into two groups, one scorched and the other feted: the victims of fascism and the fighters against fascism. The fighters were – after the fact – declared winners in the ‘anti-fascist state’. However, the demise of this state did not mean that it was now their turn to be ‘the defeated’. For better or worse, the political conditions – always a failure of ourselves. It is – ideologically ignoring all external conditions – always a failure of ourselves. For those who suffer it, defeat is inflicted from the outside, and by a superior opponent. Those who want to learn from defeat, learn that next time they should deploy better tactics, more thorough analysis and, most of all, a larger mass.

Failure, on the other hand, goes deeper. It is – ideologically ignoring all external conditions – always a failure of ourselves. What we learn from it is the following: why even under different (even under optimal) conditions, the same politics would not have achieved the desired success. Or, in materialist terms: how a different politics could have been matched from the same pitiful circumstances. Translated by Tadzio Mueller & Ben Trott

Bini Adamczak and Anna Dost

What would it mean to lose?

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What would it mean to lose?
Green New Deal: Dead end or pathway beyond capitalism?

A Green New Deal is on everybody's lips at the moment. Barack Obama has endorsed a very general version of it, the United Nations are keen, as are numerous Green parties around the world. In the words of the ‘Green New Deal Group’, an influential grouping of heterodox economists, Greens and debt-relief campaigners, such a ‘deal’ promises to solve the ‘triple crunch’ of energy, climate and economic crises.

**Frieder Otto Wolf**, an eco-socialist and early member of the German Green Party, argues that the challenge for the global movements is to hijack the Green New Deal, rather than reject it. **Tadzio Mueller**, an editor of *Turbulence*, and involved in the Climate Justice Action network, begs to differ. He looks instead to an emerging movement for ‘climate justice’. *Turbulence* sat the two of them down for a chat, and kicked off the debate by suggesting that a Green New Deal might actually offer a weak looking global left a great opportunity.

**Tadzio Mueller** Before we start looking at the crisis of the (global) left, and whether or not a Green New Deal might be an opportunity for its rejuvenation, I think there is a more important question to be answered first. Namely: to what extent is such a project a great opportunity for the rejuvenation of *global capitalism*?

Profit rates (with the possible exception of those of bailed-out banks) are at rock bottom. And there is currently nothing – no sector (like cars), no technology (like IT), no process (like ‘globalisation’) – that is promising to push them back up again in the near future. Capital, in other words, is in crisis, and, as Nicolas Stern, author of a report on the costs and opportunities of climate change for the British government, argues, it needs ‘a good driver of growth to come out of this period, and it is not just a simple matter of pumping up demand’. At the same time, we’re in the midst of another extremely serious crisis, the *biocrisis*: far from climate change being the only devastating socio-ecological crisis tendency currently affecting the planet, we are also facing a serious loss of biodiversity (some scientists refer to this as the 6th great extinction in Earth’s history), a growing scarcity of usable fresh water, overfishing, desertification, destruction of forests, and so on. There are specific processes driving each of these crises (the destruction of specific ecosystems; too much CO₂ in the atmosphere…), but ultimately they are all the result of one central contradiction: that between the expansion of capitalist production and the requirements of human life in relatively stable eco-social systems. The biocrisis is a crisis of our life (*bios*), of our collective survival on a *finite* planet, which is driven by capital’s need for infinite growth.

Now, the point about any kind of ‘green capitalism’, Green New Deal or not, is that it does not resolve this antagonism – because it can be resolved as little as the antagonism between capital and labour. Rather, a Green New Deal attempts to *internalise* it as a ‘driver of growth’. Examples of such ‘drivers’ include supposedly ‘green’ cars and ‘energy-saving’ technologies. But electric cars today still get their energy from burning fossil fuels – this time coal at the power plant, not gas in the tank. Also, so-called energy saving technologies are, first, frequently enormously energy-intensive to produce, whilst, second, their energy savings get eaten up as the ‘saved’ resources are reinvested in yet more energy-consuming activities – the so-called ‘rebound effect’.

Of course, it is theoretically possible to conceive of a capitalism whose economic growth is powered by carbon-neutral fuels. But in the world of actually-existing capitalism, growth has always meant more energy use, more greenhouse gases, and more environmental destruction.
more energy use, more greenhouse gases, and more environmental destruction.

Take the issue of climate change: the last 30 years have seen only two cases of significant reductions in CO₂ emissions. First, the collapse of the growth-oriented, state-socialist economies of Eastern Europe – greenhouse gas emissions from the Soviet economy fell by 40%; and second, the current global recession, which is reducing the consumption of oil and gas, and resulting in a 5% fall in global emissions levels. I am not saying that an uncontrolled collapse of the world economy, with all the social upsets that this might bring with it, is desirable. But I am certain that it is impossible to solve the biocrisis without moving beyond the growth imperative. So I do not believe that supporting a Green New Deal is a good opportunity for the left, because this project is fundamentally about restarting capitalist growth – and it is this growth that is the problem in the first place.

FRIEDER OTTO WOLF

The current debates on the left about whether or not to support a Green New Deal are so controversial and difficult because they remind us of two unfinished issues. First, the old but never resolved question of the ‘socialist transition’, the transformation process from the historical epoch of capitalism to that of communism. Second, they continue a more recent debate about the relevance of green issues in leftist politics. In this complicated context, I think that Tadzio’s perspective on the multiple proposals that are currently on the table is far too simplistic. In fact, the basic idea of the Green New Deal is pretty much irrefutable as a political proposition, and impossible to attack from...
Historically, then, the project of the Green New Deal has not necessarily been one of capitalist renovation. It has also focused on introducing concrete improvements, and on building broad alliances around these policies, while at the same time continuing to search for ways of overcoming the domination of the capitalist mode of production in our society.

The name given by US President F.D. Roosevelt to a 1933–1935 package of economic and social policies. They included social security and job creation, as well as massive state investment in infrastructure and the imposition of tight regulations on the banking sector. The New Deal, which offered workers a greater freedom to organise in order to demand and win better conditions, forced the US-government’s hand on many socially progressive measures – the New Deal was the outcome of bitter and frequent violent struggles. Second, it misrepresents the ‘old’ New Deal as the ‘car-do’ politician Roosevelt. In fact, that deal was fought for by a powerful workers’ movement that forced the US-government’s hand on many socially progressive measures – the New Deal was the outcome of bitter and frequently violent struggles. Second, it misrepresents (surely against the authors’ better intellectual judgement) the relationship between capitalism and the biocrisis. Supposedly a green New Deal is not, it is industrial, or fossilistic, capitalism that is to blame, but ‘the current (i.e. mainstream) Green New Deal group’. Forgotten is the environmental destruction wrought by Fordism/Taylorism; ignored is the fact that the environmental movements through which this stagnation predates neoliberal globalisation.

These omissions are far from accidental: they are symptomatic of the political alibi of the project. First, to focus on the environmental devastation wrought by neoliberalism obscures the irreconcilable antagonism between the need for infinite growth, and the fact that we live on a finite planet. As a result, restarting capitalist growth suddenly seems like a good idea. Second, the absence of struggle in this account allows its proponents to once again tell the fairytale of a capitalism that is somehow able to harmoniously integrate all its internal contradictions, producing a win-win-win-won situation: for capital (which can turn a profit), the state (which gains legitimacy), labor (which gets good, ‘green’ jobs), and the environment (which is ‘saved’). But when Roosevelt’s New Deal temporarily stopped globalisation, it was the environment (which was destroyed), the Global South (whose resources were exploited), and women (whose domestic labour and bodies were even more tightly controlled) who had to pay. The Green New Deal obscures the fact that, in capitalism, there is always someone or something that is exploited.

b) be ambivalent and have a reduced impact. But this does not make it any less relevant, as it implies taking an antagonistic ethical and political stance that exposes developmentalist and makes migrants appear as protagonists rather than victim.

In time, however, this distinction would itself show its limits: in striving to make migrants visible as protagonists, conscious protagonists risk speaking on behalf of others who are constituted by the discourse of representation. Radical counter-discourses can often practice this violence, which silences those who it would supposedly represent. Today, our critical attitude is directed not only at the so-called hegemonic elites but, in a self-critical and emancipatory way, towards migrant activists and intellectuals in European territory.

One thing has not changed. Despite restrictive measures and discriminatory laws, despite deaths off the European coast, despite the collaboration programmes with Southern governments to stop migration, despite the violence and precariness that the so-called ‘solutions’ are exposed to, people continue to migrate. Europe, today, manages to stay. The European Commission estimates the number of new migrants every year at somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000. Some time ago, I watched a TV report showing Black men, their hands and feet tied, who had been captured by police around Ceuta and Melilia. One of them, interviewed by a reporter, started staring into the camera and, speaking with a firm voice, said: ‘They can build as many fences and walls as they like. We’ll keep on trying, and we’ll make it through’

RADICAL, December 2019. "We’re making it through’!

We were among those who realised in the 1990s that neoliberalism, while promoting free circulation of capital and consumer goods, sustains migration policies that control and criminalise the circulation of people, especially those of the most impoverished and discriminated ethnic and national groups.

Today, we continue to recognise international migratory movements as a strategy of resistance to neoliberal economic policies implemented on the global South. But the political risks of generalisation have led us to distinguish between migrations and acts of protagonism. The first, non-intentional kind configures an individual strategy of response to the structural dynamics of violence and exclusion. Although it is ambivalent and has a reduced reach – since it aims at inclusion and the transformation of individual situations – it can be an important sign of resistance in the international context. The second type, critical and conscious, incorporates practices of intervention in the symbolic and political spheres, a strategic fight against racism and different forms of discrimination, and the formulation of alternatives. It too can
left that was a response to the fact that the expected social revolutions of the mid-19th century did not come to pass. On the one side, ‘maximalist’ or ‘anti-political’ positions emphasized the notion of a final ‘general strike’ which would sweep away capitalism; on the other, defenders of ‘transformist’ or ‘political’ stances advocated a politics of transition. Since the 1890s, this older debate had been reframed, in the internal debates of Social Democracy, as a confrontation between the advocates of ‘reform’ (as peaceful gradualism) and the adherents of ‘revolution’ (as a violent overthrow of the established powers). This second phase of the debate was again renewed after the successful October Revolution in Russia, and the idea of transitional demands turned out to be a central concept for defining more specifically what Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin alike had proposed as ‘revolutionary Realpolitik’.

The idea behind ‘transitional demands’ was to articulate positions that were, on the one hand, demands for specific improvements, on the other, a criticism of particularly pressing wrongs – one example would be the struggle for a shorter working day. But at the same time, the struggle for those (very ‘reasonable’) demands would acquire a revolutionary momentum, calling into question the very relations of power upholding capitalist class domination, and initiating a process of further radicalisation among the masses. Incidentally, it was with these kinds of ideas in mind that parts of the radical left in the US were active during the time of the New Deal – both within Roosevelt’s administration, and among those involved in the upsurge of working-class organisation linked to the emergence of the radical umbrella union, CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). Mostly, they did not labour under the illusion that this was already a process of socialist transition, but they did believe that New Deal politics might open a path towards it.

To reject the New Deal in its entirety means not learning any of the lessons that we on the left should have learnt by now. It is bad politics, and repeats an unfortunate tendency on the left to dismiss mere ‘improvements’, such as those achieved by what was scathingly called ‘trade-unionism’, while being entirely out of touch with historical reality. Of course Frower is right that it is not enough, particularly amidst the currently acute social and ecological crises, to simply dismiss something because it is ‘capitalist’ (without providing rights and initiatives. But that is not what the emerging global movement for climate justice is doing. In the mobilisation towards the climate summit in Copenhagen, the network Climate Justice Action has articulated a set of positions that we hope will function much like transitional or directional demands. Examples include: ‘leave fossil resources in the ground’; recognise and make reparations for ecological debt; strengthen community control over resources and production, be it food or energy’. The demands can be summarised under two broad headings. The first is climate justice, by which we assert that there is no way to solve the biocrisis without a massive redistribution of wealth and power – which in turn implies that the biocrisis can only be solved through collective struggle. The second is, currently for us, an abstract better word, degrowth, which refers to the need for collectively planned economic shrinkage. These are not just demands that are presented to a government or international institution (which is not to say that government action will not play an important role). They are not aims around which multiple movements and positions can coalesce (they can have so-called compositional effects). They provide an antagonistic vision that will prevent the immediate cooptation of global movements (as happened in 2005 with the G8 Summit at Gleneagles and the Make Poverty History campaign). And, finally, our struggle over these demands will actually increase our collective power to achieve them.

Even the FOW But calling the transition towards socialism by a different name – whether it is ‘degrowth’ or ‘climate justice’ – does not solve the shifting of the problem of the current constellation of social forces. In short, there is no political subject in sight that has any plausible capability of effectively starting a process of socialist transition in any of the relevant countries dominated by capitalist mode of production. I agree with your assessment that – with the possible exception of Latin America – left social forces are pretty weak right now. But I do not think that the left, starting from the fact of our weakness, can arrive at the conclusion that we need to start picking and choosing between the different aspects of the ‘New Deal’, selectively supporting some and rejecting others. (Given the powerful social forces already arranged in the field, our support for the biocrisis irrelevant anyway). Surely the effective- ness of our opposition will depend on the degree of collective power we can build in the current situation? And building collective power, I would argue, requires the construction of an antagonistic subject, or subjects, which can only be done by marking a clearly oppositional position to the proposals currently on the table.

In this process it is important to remember the lessons of the alter-globalisation movement, where much of the conceptual/ideological inspiration for a global cycle of struggles came from Southern movements, not Northern think tanks. I believe that something similar is happening today, that ‘climate justice’ was coined in the global South and a movement is emerging around this slogan. Currently it is based around a coalition of Southern movements, including the Indigenous Environment Network, and the global small and landless farmers’ movement Via Campesina, alongside Northern autonomous activist groups such as the UK’s Camp for Climate Action, and it’s rapidly growing beyond these constituencies. Or put another way: the global movements, at the end of the cycle of anti-neoliberal struggles, are beginning to coalesce around the problematic of the biocrisis. We don’t yet know where these movements are heading, and what the new cycle of struggles will look like. But although it might take time, this is where I believe the greatest potential for a social and ecological transformation out of the current crises lies, rather than in supporting a New Deal. The Green New Deal aims to restart the madness of capitalist growth.

**FOW** If I understand you correctly, you seem to be suggesting that the climate crisis, or the ‘biocrisis’, as you call it, is essentially derivative of the social centres and the social movement. But although it might take time, this is where I believe the greatest potential for a social and ecological transformation out of the current crises lies, rather than in supporting a New Deal. The Green New Deal aims to restart the madness of capitalist growth.

*POLITICAL BODIES vs. BODIES POLITIC*

Ten years ago, some certainties traversed us. That doing politics was something for more than a handful: we had to connect to many others. That we lacked names with which to account for our experience: we wanted to draw cartographies that would re-define what happened to us (our lives, precarity, the privatisation of the world, mobility). That politics could not be a question of identity: it had to pass through the elaboration of situations shared with different others. (We then asked: what is it in common between what happens to us and what goes on in other parts of the world? What is the relation between the various worlds that comprise the world?) That to grasp the complexity of global transformation, we opened the possibility of producing a response and, above all, new questions.

That investigation was in itself a form of action. That bodies could not be at the margins of politics: they are part of the field of operations of power and of multiple struggles. That feminisms and post-colonialisms were our allies. That we left the akopou [squats] to build open and heterogeneous social centres, but we had not really broken away from identity and the ghetto. We started to understand the difficulty of delimiting a territory: an experience that seemed impossible to take in and didn’t become translated into new rights or new spaces. Besides, our ‘positive’ idea of precarity didn’t connect with the social malaise. Paradoxically, we started idealising others. (Without the Green New Deal who would see it as an opportunity to achieve a significant realignment in global power structures and advance a number of progressive agendas. A Green New Deal: Joined-Up Climate Justice is available at www.greennewdealgroup.org)

**Green New Deal** Although the idea emerged in German eco-socialist discussions during the early 1990s, today the term refers mostly to proposals that aim to solve the ‘triple crunch’ (i.e. the combined economic, energy, and climate crises) by way of a large-scale programme of investment in ‘green technologies’ and ‘green jobs’. The political orientations of the proposals vary, from those on the right that see it largely as a possibility to ecologically modernise capitalism, to those on the left – such as the British Green New Deal Group – who see it as an opportunity to achieve a significant realignment in global power structures and advance a number of progressive agendas. A Green New Deal: Joined-Up Climate Justice is available at www.greennewdealgroup.org

**t-10**
Without the capability of effectively indicating a significant and achievable first step, radical visions remain impractical, nothing more than a pie-in-the-sky ideal sustaining your hopes for a better future.

If this is indeed the case, then it would be a grave historical and political error to see the ecological crisis as just a crisis of capitalism, and to focus on fighting the latter while ignoring the specificity of the former.

But is this really true? Are we ‘just’ with the ecological crisis, as some in the mainstream green movement seem to think? I would argue that humanity is in fact facing a plurality of synchronic crises that are irreducible to each other. If this is indeed the case, then it would be a grave historical and political error to see the ecological crisis as just a crisis of capitalism. Since global food crisis is so significant for some experts, see it as ushering in an ‘the-sky ideal sustaining your hopes for a revolutionary quietism’, which prefers doing nothing (except writing theoretical treatises), in order to avoid getting one’s hands dirty in the vicissitudes of actual political practice. Accepting this idea of the first step in no way obligues us to refrain from elaborating our socialist and eco-feminist visions more concretely. On the contrary, no significant advances ever occur within theoretical-political debates without an underlying urgency. It is precisely now that we find ourselves confronted with the productive challenge of deepening our ecological, feminist, and socialist/communist vision. Only by way of such a deepening would it be possible to distinguish positive first steps from false steps. False steps are those that do not allow you to foresee any further options for more radical change and structural transformation among those who have lost all (time in dead ends, like the proposal for reliance on first-generation agrofuels as a way of mitigating the ‘energy crisis’. Such fuels actually exacerbate the global food crisis, as their carbon balance is often just as bad, or even worse, than that of fossil fuels.

Of course, from a pragmatic perspective, why spend lots of time looking for ways to reduce emissions (witness the amazing results to date in the field of alternative power)? If we can show that capitalism is the enemy of nature not just in some mythical ‘last instance’, but in each and every day, very immediately. And how complex can the chain of mediation really be, to take one example, a 40% collapse of the Soviet economy led to a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over the course of the 1990s?) Finally, from a pragmatic perspective, why spend lots of time looking for ways to reduce emissions (witness the amazing results to date in the field of alternative power)? If we can show that capitalism is the enemy of nature not just in some mythical ‘last instance’, but in each and every day, very immediately. And how complex can the chain of mediation really be, to take one example, a 40% collapse of the Soviet economy led to a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over the course of the 1990s? To start with, invoking urgency is essentially a politically indeterminate move. By this I mean that anyone who invokes urgency generally does so to explain why their particular programme should take precedence over others, over the ‘normal’ course of things. As a result, calls for ‘urgent’ action should not be dismissed, but treated with a healthy degree of scepticism.

Next, Frieder is suggesting that by focusing on the ‘crisis with the crisis of capitalism’ I am avoiding the complex chain of mediation that links capitalism to the two phenomena. This, he implies, allows me to focus on capitalism at the expense of steps that could realistically, and in ‘good time’, address the energy crisis and, of course, the social-eco-feminist visions more concretely. It is precisely now that we find ourselves confronted with the productive challenge of deepening our ecological, feminist, and socialist/communist vision. Only by way of such a deepening would it be possible to distinguish positive first steps from false steps. False steps are those that do not allow you to foresee any further options for more radical change and structural transformation among those who have lost all time in dead ends, like the proposal for reliance on first-generation agrofuels as a way of mitigating the ‘energy crisis’. Such fuels actually exacerbate the global food crisis, as their carbon balance is often just as bad, or even worse, than that of fossil fuels.

Therefore, we should not reject the problematic underlying present proposals for a Green New Deal, even though we will have to prevent them from being functionalised by Green parties as something over which they hold a quasi-monopoly. Instead, we should struggle to make them our own. At this point in time, hijacking the idea of a Green New Deal is our best, and only, shot at putting the world on the path towards an eco-socialist transformation.

Frieder Otto Wolf is an eco-socialist and an early member (1962) of the German Green Party. Between 1984 and 1999 he represented the party in the European Parliament; he was defeated in the 1999 election. He is currently regarded as a political philosopher and has concentrated on teaching philosophy and working within political networks since 2000. Further details see, www.FriederOttoWolf.de.

Tadzio Mueller is active in Climate Justice Action (www.climate-justice-action.org) and author of reviving green capitalism and the Green New Deal, including Another Capitalism is Possible? (in Abramsky, K., ed., Sparking a World-wide Energy Revolution: Social Struggles in the Transition to a Post-Petrol World, He is an editor of Turbulence

**TO ADVANCE ONE INCH...**

My face was in South African newspapers around September 1999. I ‘dared’ to challenge the ANC regional leader and ANC national congress (ANC) by questioning its privatization programme. I was ANC regional leader and ward councillor for my area in Soweto. The press projected me as a victim of the ANC’s lack of democracy at a time when its hegemony was more or less unsailable. I did my best to use the attention to spread the message against neoliberal policy. I won public sympathy and maintained my immediate local support base.

But I failed to use the commotion to go back to the 200 or so ANC branches in the region and explain to ordinary members why I was opposed to neoliberalism as a socialist ANC leader. I should have gone there the same way I used to go there building up the party, visiting people in their homes, distributed pamphlets, engaged in public debates and so forth. Instead I let the media tell my story while the ANC leadership did its damage control. I was captured from ANC leadership ranks into becoming the famous face of the then emergency anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. On reflection, I should have ducked the fame and concentrated on advancing a thousand ordinary workers one inch, rather than the heady 10 mile revolutionary advance of myself and a few radical comrades. I should have concentrated in centre of my political universe. I should have worked harder to make the masses their own liberators. For me, the struggle in post-apartheid society is not intended to greenwash capitalism.
It’s all about potatoes and computers

Recipes for the co-operatives of the future

In the early eighties, Swiss author p.m. - the most common initials in the Zurich telephone directory – published Bolo'Bolo, 'a field guide to organising utopias', in the words of one reviewer. 'Replete with maps, drawings, a new lexicon and universally recognised symbols, and “a planetary menu for subversion”, the text could be considered a political nerd’s version of one of Tolkien’s fantasies, but its references to real events and reflexive tone give the book a kind of crackpot sense of real possibility.' A quarter-century later, p.m. is still planning.

ACCESS TO LAND AND KNOWLEDGE

The coming centrality of ‘the commons’ – based on the principle of the unconditional survival of all human beings on a decent basis – is obvious at this historical moment. At first they appear to be a ‘fall-back-option’ for a system that is unable to allocate, use and distribute social assets back-option’ for a system that is unable to

moment. At the moment, the world is divided: an ‘affluent’ 20 percent consume 80 percent of the resources, whilst a poor 80 percent share the remaining 20 percent. If we consider the whole planet as one community, the prospects of living together peacefully look bleak indeed if we cannot overcome this chasm. There must be an understanding of a ‘good life’ on a planetary basic creating ways of us earthlings living together. The trust and cultural solidarity needed for the collective and sustainable use of resources can only be established on the basis of justice. Climate and geographical circumstances can be taken into account – we do not all have to live the same way – but our demands on the ecosystem must roughly be the same. Thanks to scientific advances, there is no reason why we should not all lead a decent life with plenty of spare time for our hobbies. Technical productivity is so high at the moment that capitalist ‘value’ has problems catching up with it.

Now, what might a good neighbour-hood life look like in, let’s say, Switzerland, my accidental home country? A neighbour-hood of about 500 members will not be purely urban, but linked to a piece of land of about 100 hectares (247 acres), situated within a perimeter of 15 to 80 kilometres (10 to 50 miles), depending on local conditions. Inhabitants of the urban community merge into one cooperative with those who farm the linked land. The Micro-agro: Neighbourhoods and Doughs

Ultimately the whole output of the complex planetary economic machine ends up as commodities that we use in our homes and neighbourhoods. If our everyday lifestyles can be redefined to respect general ecological (=healthy biosphere) and psychological (=happiness) limits, the rest will fall into place. At the moment, the world is divided: an ‘affluent’ 20 percent consume 80 percent of the resources, whilst a poor 80 percent share the remaining 20 percent. If we consider the whole planet as one community, the prospects of living together peacefully look bleak indeed if we cannot overcome this chasm. There must be an understanding of a ‘good life’ on a planetary basic creating ways of us earthlings living together. The trust and cultural solidarity needed for the collective and sustainable use of resources can only be established on the basis of justice. Climate and geographical circumstances can be taken into account – we do not all have to live the same way – but our demands on the ecosystem must roughly be the same. Thanks to scientific advances, there is no reason why we should not all lead a decent life with plenty of spare time for our hobbies. Technical productivity is so high at the moment that capitalist ‘value’ has problems catching up with it.

Now, what might a good neighbour-hood life look like in, let’s say, Switzerland, my accidental home country? A neighbour-hood of about 500 members will not be purely urban, but linked to a piece of land of about 100 hectares (247 acres), situated within a perimeter of 15 to 80 kilometres (10 to 50 miles), depending on local conditions. Inhabitants of the urban community merge into one cooperative with those who farm the linked land. The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which published a report on global agriculture comparable in scope to that published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, recommends mid-sized agricultural units as the global solution to feeding the 9 billion or so people who will be living a few decades in the future. (Given fossil fuel inputs, the net caloric output of large agro-industrial production is negative and therefore has no future if we are to tackle carbon emissions and climate change.) The only feasible way of doing agriculture on this planet is intensive, mixed-crop, largely organic production: permaculture. This form of agriculture is hopelessly unprofitable under current conditions – so a new type of cooperation between consumers and producers must be found. In fact, the very distinction has to be abolished, transforming agricul-
Micro-agro links two nodes: an urban microcentre and a rural agrocentre. A microcentre is a cluster comprising a food depot, communal kitchen, lounge, and restaurant – it’s a service centre catering to all of the neighbourhood’s 500-odd members of it must be got rid of, because it is not sustainable. The car industry, for instance. If we want a global commons based on justice, our power output can never exceed 1,000 watts and this, in most contexts, precludes the use of private cars. Trains, buses, tramsways and boats are and were viable alternatives. Some of the industrial capacity used for cars and aeroplanes can be dedicated to the development and production of such means of transportation, jobs, qualifications and technological know-how would not all be lost. Whatever we do, the overall volume of transport must be reduced, be it ‘private’ or ‘public’. This can be achieved by reintegrating as many functions as possible into neighbourhoods and boroughs (see above).

How can our industrial waste be managed differently? At the moment, the way out seems to be nationalisation. As bankruptcies become more frequent, the state can acquire factories at cheap prices. Nationalised industries have a bad track record, and not just because of the neoliberal propaganda against them.

The old nation state with its opaque institutions is not capable of managing an entire industrial base in the interests of the people. The opaque “trust” must be transformed into a system of democratically organised general services. Ever since E. F. Schumacher wrote Small Is Beautiful, we have known that inefficiency arises if the size of organisations doesn’t correspond to their optimal range of operations. Economies of scale can also mean a smaller scale. So the general services must not form one big company, but rather exist as an articulated network of subsidiary, semi-autonomous entities.

Why don’t we call this system industrial subsistence? Without a certain degree of direct inter-personal communication, there can be no democracy. But before we try to invent brilliant new systems of industrial democracy, we should start with what is already there. I have mentioned two “levels” of democracy, the neighbourhood and the small town or borough. The neighbourhood is not a branch of general services, but rather a kind of collective household managed by its members. This form of direct democracy has been tested in innumerable cooperatives in countless forms all over the world. It has its limitations and problems, but there is no alternative unless you want to hand over control over your everyday life to anonymous organisms that “know better”.

Things look different on the level of towns or boroughs (20,000 persons), especially if they’re lumped together into larger cities. Here, existing public services can be augmented, perfected and democratically supervised. A borough is a kind of “basic municipality” and could be the first branch/agency of the general services, providing water, energy, transportation, schools, a polyclinic, street maintenance, security, justice, housing/building, a fire brigade, communications/media and so on. Already, prices for these services are “political” – there’s no market. In Zurich, for instance, the city has decided to lower water prices and the city owns its own electricity supply – it is the only city in Switzerland where electricity rates have been stable in recent years. Other cities have foolishly privatised these services, and the price of electricity has risen drastically.

At the level of small towns, public supervision of the management of services still works pretty well. Prices and rates can be set by democratic referendum. If we want to pay less for tram tickets, we can decide to do so. The goals are not profit or competition, but political: the welfare of the town’s inhabitants, as well as ecological concerns. There is neither anonymous regulation nor the market’s “invisible hand”, but conscious collective choice. As the private sector is collapsing, this model can be extended accordingly. Building companies can be taken over, clothes or furniture exchanges can be established, repair companies...
of all kinds can become public services (plumbers, roofers, electricians), media can become freely accessible (the byres!), local industries can become ‘public workshops’. In any way, existing public services can be extended into all industries through vertical integration. Public transport enterprises can take over the construction of trains, the school system can take over print shops, paper factories, furniture factories, construction companies, etc.

At the next level – regions of hundreds of thousands of people, or seriously big cities (New York, Shanghai, Moscow) – additional services have to be created. These include hospitals, universities, power plants, concrete factories, opera houses, zoos, museums and ice rinks. They too can be democratically managed. Such urban services have a long tradition, but in a new situation, new services and enterprises can also be created. A cooperatory – not to be confused with a cooperative – is a platform where agents of social productivity interact. In such places, ‘innovators’ of all kinds can ‘public’ and arrange finance from regional banks. The idea of the bank here is to facilitate the popular construction of large-scale enterprises. The ‘anticipation of necessary future resources’ (communal planning) is also integrated into these institutions. These include, for instance, a construction fund taken by obscure boards of directors, but in public assemblies. From the point of view of communication, it’s an ideal ‘market’, from the point of view of the commons, it’s a democratic council. When you have an idea nowadays, you have to consult a whispering banker or a mutual help fund. The idea of a telecommunication leap. Numerous infrastructures have not been developed or been repressed because they do not promise profits. Much ecological design is already technologically feasible and available. The Product Life Institute (www.product-life.org), for instance, stresses durability, adaptability, modularity and reparability in its designs. These aspects make them incompatible with capitalist profitability and control: they save work and resources, they do not imperil the global scale production, they’re intrinsically use-value oriented and are unfit for the production of surplus-value or for authorizing command structures. In a globalised production of energy (not just solar, but from a wide range of sources) in the hands of communities affords a material autonomy that is much more reliable than a politically constructed one. (Actually, ‘material autonomy’ is just another way to say ‘self-sufficiency’.)

Ultimately, the planet as a whole is the commons. With the help of the internet bytes can be shared without limit. In the same way all general services at all levels, free sharing of intellectual production is possible without endangering the survival of its producers. (It isn’t easy to talk about sharware if you have nothing to share.) The planet can become a sphere for the free exchange of knowledge and ideas. Ultimately, these knowledge commons also have an impact on physical production – blueprints for machines and all manner of products are freely available. In a way to say ‘self-sufficiency’, all commons, a material commons must be constituted to establish a just distribution of resources. Burning fossil fuels, for example, cannot be considered a simple solution; it’s a slow, irreversible process. Carbon dioxide doesn’t recognise borders. So there must be a world-wide reorganisation (perhaps constituting the UN) that sets limits on the amount of fossil fuels that can be taken out of the ground and that makes sure that what is extracted is distributed fairly.

A prerequisite for the creation of a truly democratic organisation at a global level is subsistence and democracy at all the levels below: neighbourhood, borough, region, territory and (sub)continent. At the moment the constellation of planetary organisations are nation states of very unequal political power and different levels of democratic decision-making. The global commons cannot be managed under the supervision of superpowers or regional groupings. What we need are two converging movements: first, the dissolution of large nations, along with the empowerment of territories, and second, the creation of effective and legitimate planetary institutions. The first process is actually under way, although sometimes with very unsavoury motivations – a new nationalism, ethnic exclusivism, short-sighted oligarchies or ‘tribal’ interests (small can also be ugly!). Maybe this step back to small-scale ethnic/tribal/micro-nationalisms might be needed as a stepping stone that breaks up larger ones, which in turn spur two steps forwards towards planetary-scale institutions – think of Uiggria or Tibet.

**The TRUTH of the commons**

The commons has three spheres: general services, creative enterprises and agriculture. Each sphere is an aspect of a comprehensive global commons, but they operate differently, both materially and institutionally.

**General services** can only be managed by delegation, from the bottom up, with strict rules ensuring efficacy, accountability, non-exclusivity and democracy. Even so, there’s a risk of compartmentalisation, of re-oligarchisation, of the ‘authority of the steam-engine’ (as Engels called it), or put another way, there can be no democratic discussion in the cockpit of an airplane. The technocratic development of the commons can give rise to certain delays in accountability. The use of such technologies can be minimised (no nuclear power plants, fewer airplanes, fewer risky technologies, prohibition of toxic substances) and their management can be made more transparent with democratic supervision. But there remains an intrinsic risk of some misuse of power. Therefore, it is essential that the other two spheres have different material powers, with different institutions and constituencies.

Diversity of social organisation is important for the development of the commons. Natural diversity is for the biosphere. Agricultural subsistence is the ideal counter-balance to the general-services sphere: it’s tactically independent, managed by directly democratic entities (neighbourhoods) and it operates on different rhythms (those of nature). The creative enterprises – that permeate all sectors – also act as a counter-balance to general services. Such enterprises have the most diverse organisational structures (from a one-person venture to a global cooperative) and they may operate with market systems, with money, bartering, gifts or just when there is occasional demand.

The truth of the commons corresponds to the political wisdom of the separation of powers and the limitations imposed by the law of value. But there remains a risk of compartmentalisation, of re-oligarchisation, of the ‘authority of the steam-engine’ (as Engels called it) or put another way there can be no democratic planning. It merely serves as a replacement for what 19th-century thinkers called the ‘steam-engine’ (as Engels called it), or put another way, there can be no democratic planning. It merely serves as a

### Table 1: The trinity of the commons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planet</th>
<th>Subcontinent</th>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Borough/town</th>
<th>Neighbourhood</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.9 billion</td>
<td>0.5 to 1 billion</td>
<td>10 million</td>
<td>0.1 to 1 million</td>
<td>0.5 to 1 million</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>water, energy, building, sewage, kindergarten</td>
<td>water, energy, building, sewage, kindergarten</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL/PERS</th>
<th>GENERAL SERVICES</th>
<th>CREATIVE</th>
<th>AGRICULTURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planet</td>
<td>fossil fuels, energy, communication, pharmaceutical drugs, global bank, steel, emergency aid, space travel, scientific research, media</td>
<td>software, music, literature, film, fashion, cosmetic products, computer games, musical instruments</td>
<td>emergency aid, seed banks, spices, coffee, tea, cocoa,spirits, tobacco, coca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcontinent</td>
<td>vehicles, boats, canals, water supply, energy grids, machinery, engines, paints, chemical products, electric parts, continental bank</td>
<td>clothing, cosmetic products, software, circus, household items, music, theatre groups</td>
<td>wines, olives, canned goods, cereals, cheese, fish, condensed milk, dried mushrooms and beans, nuts, truffles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territory</td>
<td>energy, trains, buses, tribunals, metal products, university, ceramics, glass, paper, territorial cooperatory and bank</td>
<td>local textiles, bags, cups, bicycles, carpets, literature, brushes, music</td>
<td>cereals, potatoes, sugar, beer, salt, wine, cheese, sausages, oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>water, energy, hospital, public transports, concrete, police, sewage recycling, theatre, regional cooperatory and bank</td>
<td>furniture, wood, straw, leather products, hats, special vehicles, jewellery, stationery, pots, cassowaries</td>
<td>milk products, fruit, meat, eggs, pork, vegetables, herbs, salads, hams, chocolate, fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>water, energy, opera, museums, ice rinks, swimming pools, public transportation, sport stadia, parks, cooperatory (and bank)</td>
<td>cabinets, restaurants, clothing, shoes, meats, sweets, spirits, cigars, beer</td>
<td>urban gardens, bees, berries, nuts, rabbits, chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borough/town</td>
<td>primary school, high school, health centre, dentist, energy, planning, police, cooperatory</td>
<td>accessories, belts, ties, computers, cookies, beer, furniture</td>
<td>herbs, take-away meals, pasta, lemonades, flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td>water, energy, building maintenance, sewage, kindergarten</td>
<td>clothing, washing, cleaning, repairing, child care, housework</td>
<td>bread, yogurt, herbs, berries, urban gardening, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>personal hygiene, gifts, mutual help, clothing, individual enterprises, massages</td>
<td>meals, urban gardening, herbs in balconies pots, digestion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Today, the neoliberal deal is null and void; the middle ground has crumbled away. We’ve gone past the era when cheap credit, rising asset prices and falling commodity prices could compensate for stagnant wages. Those days are over but no new middle ground has cohered. Nobody has ‘agreed’ any replacement ‘deal’. That’s why we find ourselves in a state of limbo.
The commons have three spheres: general services, creative enterprises and agriculture. Each sphere is an aspect of a comprehensive global commons, but they operate differently, both materially and institutionally.

**The inchoateess of small commodity production?**

Is there a risk that capitalist relationships could arise again out of small-scale monetised production, spreading from the sphere of creative enterprises? (This is a big concern in some parts of the left which demand completely moneyless exchange.) I think that there is no danger of this happening. Finally, the other two spheres both operate beyond the law of value and they provide full existential security, so that any blackmailing with ‘jobs’ is impossible.

Secondly, there is no historical evidence that modern industrial capitalism automatically arises out of small commodity production. If that were true, capitalism would have originated in China, India or the Near East, where such conditions existed for thousands of years (much earlier than in Europe). Modern capitalism emerged with the creation of territorial states at the end of the 15th Century, and with their need for a cannon-building industry, which in turn was financed by the emerging banking systems of Florence, the Netherlands and Germany. Only these state-run enterprises were able to break down traditional small-scale commodity production, whose stagnation had been successfully guaranteed by guilds for hundreds of years. Shoe factories do not grow out of the neighbourhood cobbler’s shop!

Thirdly, small commodity production need not be completely unregulated and can be contained within healthy limits. Ecological regulations must certainly apply, as well as minimum-wage conditions. Small commodity producers must also pay compensation (‘taxes’) for the use of communal goods and services, so that they don’t turn into a parasitical ‘free enterprise sphere’ for extra-profits of informal oligarchies.

As everybody’s survival is amply cared for by subsistence and general services, a sphere of free enterprise would rapidly be a domain of the low, of the revolutionary imaginary evolutionary leaps. As we know, free enterprise is not free for those who must take any job just to survive: it’s just the ideology of the dominant class. People wanted to have money in order to have things, of course, and two-digit unemployment rates towards a radicalisation of democracy...

It is true, we didn’t manage to do it. We were losing the battle in a capitalist: capitalism’s paradigm of scarcity could be overcome, simply through the abundance represented by the material and cultural commons. We mistook what we thought and believed in for what we needed people to believe in. We forget that Marxian truth that, in a class society, the dominant ideology is ecologically sound procedure. (Markets are terribly wasteful!) But we begin to establish such planning mechanisms, we have to answer the question: what is that we do with what we have planned. There is no point to minimise planning from the technical point of view — the idea that you’d need skyscrapers full of calculating bureaucrats is completely obsolete. But the principle of leaving people as free as possible to communicate directly is sound. Planning can lead to distortions and can create unwelcome power-bases that must be counter-balanced. Planning should not be a fetish, but merely a system of support, when interpersonal communication becomes too complex. It is obvious that all the activities in the first sector or sphere, general services, must be planned at a global level. Already, most of these services are planned. However, once we have gotten away from present-day systems — which will need planning — subsistence agriculture requires minimal planning. The actual production of most food in agrocentres is left directly to the neighbourhoods. Agriculture operating on the level of territories, and the ‘French Model’ seems to be the darling of The Economist at the moment. It was not planning that got the socialist countries into trouble, but planning with.

A postcapitalist household system is in principle demand-oriented. Instead of dumping commodities onto a market, goods that are needed are ordered by the consumers (who in turn are organised democratically on various levels). The producers now pay the wages (creating different hats) tries to match these orders with the available resources (including their capacity or willingness to produce them) and give feedback to the ordering persons/institutions, who in turn modify their orders. This system of iterative planning seems clumsy, but compared to programmes that can support it already exist. According to Paul Cockshott and Allan Cottrell’s Towards a New Socialism, there is no amount of the planning algorithms couldn’t handle. Even if consumer/producer iterations go back and forth numerous times, the specifications of production are calculated within seconds. So almost unlimited planning is possible. And it should be used, because it is the most just and the most supply- and demand-oriented enterprises that use all kinds of regulation, including markets, free distribution and planning. The attempt of some of the state-capitalist bureaucracies to regulate the area of small businesses led to some of its most depressing and ridiculous results. (Cocksheft and Cottrell are optimistic that even these bureaucracies can be improved.) A lemonade stand at the street corner, could easily be planned within a few minutes. They also suggest, that — unfortunately — some of those planning tools are too early to be possible. And when it began to look feasible in the 1960s, the bureaucrats stopped computerising planning because they were afraid of losing their hold on power and privileges. The planning bureaucracy itself had now become one of the major sectors of the economy.

**ELEMENTS OF A (GREEN) NEW DEAL OF ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION**

Currently there isn’t sufficient awareness of the necessity for a comprehensive social, economic and political restructuring of our global system. By definition a crisis is a turning point in the capitalist project: we could get further exploitation and oppression, we could move beyond capitalist domination. It is difficult to discover how strong and how prepared the forces of radical change are. Assuming that such forces exist, we need to present a ‘model system’, we need to present a model which was not at all utopian, if one bet for new ideas! We ended up fighting to have money in order to have things, to have power and privileges. The planning of the necessity for a comprehensive social, economic and political restructuring of our global system. By definition a crisis is a turning point in the capitalist project: we could get further exploitation and oppression, we could move beyond capitalist domination. It is difficult to discover how strong and how prepared the forces of radical change are. Assuming that such forces exist, we need to present a ‘model system’, we need to present a model which was not at all utopian, if one bet for new ideas! We ended up fighting...
even appear to be solutions to soften its contradictions increase.

Evidently, postcapitalist change must begin at the centre of capitalist globalisation, in the United States. It is insurmountable that contemporary capitalism excludes can coexist with an intact power structure of global capitalism. Of course, elements can be isolated, tested and prepared in certain niches (Europe, Japan, South America), but they must be tentative and temporary. They must be abandoned before they get militarised and perverted by the debilitating pressure of world capital. As soon as they are forced into a defensive position, they may be able to be altogether re-absorbed by the hegemonic system. At the same time they will have set a discouraging example and will reduce the chance of a definite breakthrough.

In the US the postcapitalist era will probably take on the – historically false, but who cares? – name of a ‘Green New Deal’. It is obvious that the Green New Deal, as proposed by Obama and some Green parties, is only meant to be Plan B for the rescue of capitalism – taken even meant to be a deal, i.e. a bargaining proposition for unions, state and bosses, but just a list of possibilities that will fall in its soft phase and can be defined in different ways – if there is enough pressure. Why not hitchhike on this vehicle and make it green before it’s too late? It will basically establish state manage of an almost-stagnant ‘capitalism’, with a profit-rate below one percent. The stronghold of the old oligarchies of capital will slowly be eroded and their companies will be integrated into the general services. From the current 50 percent, the share of Gross Domestic Product allocated by the state will rise to 70 percent or more, and so determine the strategic factors of development.

This benign strategy (scenario A) is based on the ability of the working classes to make the other option – aggressive exploitation, meep rise of the profit rate, ecological and military risk-taking – less appealing for the global oligarchies. The new French style of class struggle – taking managers or owners as hostages, threatening to blow up factories, riots – plus global rigidity on salaries, could help to convince them. An additional promising strategy of disarmament, of an anti-ecological war of attrition, could comprise the following behaviours:

- refusal to buy the new (energy-efficient, hybrid) cars, for there is no such thing as an ecological sustainable car – an electric car is also a nuclear car, or a coal-powered car;
- insisting on ecological products, standards and services;
- refusal to replace unnecessary household goods;
- refusal of suburban segregation – instead moving together to urban centres;
- making connections with farmers and building up subsistence networks, boycotting supermarkets and small grocers alike;
- creating territorial subsistence (‘trans-local’) circuits;
- refusal of additional work, slowing down work rhythms;
- insisting on free social services (education, health, transport, etc.);
- boycotting shopping centres;
- watching DVDs in neighbourhood centres (more than checking out former inner-city cinemas and boycotting multiplex cinemas in shopping malls);
- slow food, slow work, slow travel;
- reduction of commercial consumption, substituted by communal sharing;
- exchange of goods for free.

The most individual activities cannot replace collective action, but they can become a nutritious side dish and keep the ‘movement of discouragement’ (of resistance and recovery) alive in periods of relative social tranquillity. Collective action is dependent on a logic of events: it is path-dependent, and not all events are possible at any given time, even if theoretically correct and necessary. (Maybe at this point Shakespeare could be more helpful than Marx.) But we can be confident that many opportunities soon will arise for effective collective action. All of this would lead the capitalist machine into such a quagmire that scenario A would look relatively appealing.

The following proposals are all based on scenario A. Scenario B – a global showdown – could be forced upon us. Though the winning of which seems very improbable to me. The costs would be immense. It’s the old question: socialism or barbarism?

A Green New Deal would bring the state, the capitalists and the environment to a table. The central item of the Deal would be the ecological and social reconstruction of the US. The population of the United States is roughly 300 million, so we’d theoretically be dealing with 600,000 neighbourhoods, 15,000 dormitory towns, 300 regional territories. As the territorial distribution of the population isn’t homogeneous and various geographical factors come into play, the effective numbers will be somewhat different. The creation of 600,000 sustainable neighbourhoods based on micro-agro subsistence at a cost $5 million each (not including the costs of resettling sub urbans), totaling $3.6 trillion. The establishment of lively town centres might cost $20 billion after another $300 billion. (In some towns, almost no investment would be necessary, in others hundreds of millions.) All in all, we’re talking about $4 trillion that must be invested over a number of years. Additional investment should go into the rehabilitation of the (social) train system. The creation or relocation of regional and territorial industries alongside train tracks would also cost billions of dollars. The insulation of buildings, local energy plants, eco-design of industrial goods would create a final micro-industrial network that would not lead to overcapitalisation. This promise could be important to get some of the more enlightened (green) capitalists on board.

As costs of living could be reduced by these schemes without any loss of quality of life, the Green New Deal programme could easily be financed out of current wages – let’s say ten percent. Of course, it could also be financed by taxes or the national debt, but this would only distort the situation, defer payment and trigger inflation. In the sense, the proletariat of the US would find a virtual cooperative that would be able to determine the use-value aspect of capitalist development. The organisation of this cooperative would be the existing state, or the tripartite Green New Deal Board running the programme of ecoclastic reconstruction – in real-political terms this is the state. The annual wages of the 100 million US workers currently total $3.7 trillion, ten percent of this would be $370 billion a year. Within ten years, the programme could be financed without creating new debt bubble and risking runaway inflation. Realistically, the programme would start out with a three percent contribution.

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We speak of an impasse in order to characterise the current political situation. It is an elusive image, hard to theorise but greatly present in the different situations we are experiencing. As a concept we wish to construct, it requires a perceptive practice that takes us beyond the representations used by the language of politics, essay, philosophy or social sciences; and a sensibility that will drive us towards this suspended time, in which all acts waver, but everything that must be thought of once occurs.

The notion of impasse aspires to naming a reality whose signs are not evident, and it is put forward as the key to comprehend the atmosphere in which we live. In doing so, we recur to a set of articulations of the discursive, affective and political imaginary order enable what articulations of the discursive, affective and political imaginary order enable activity in the present. A present that, as we said, is revealed as suspended time between the irony of the eternal return of the same and the infinitesimal preparation of an historical variation. Impasse is above all an ambiguous temporality, where the dynamics of creation are superimposed, without any single one imposing its reign in a definite way. But everything that must be thought of as we shall see further on, it is not true that the antagonistic perspective has been absolutely dissolved, neither is collective dynamism paralyzed, nor by far. On the contrary: in impasse, elements of counter-power and capitalist hegemony coexist, according to promiscuous forms that are hard to unravel. Ambiguity thus becomes the decisive characteristic of this period and manifests itself in a double dimension: as a time of crisis with no visible outcome; and as a stage where heterogeneous social logics are superimposed, without any single one imposing its reign in a definite way.

The truth is that the feeling that political activity from below (as we came to know it) is stagnating and lying somewhat dormant acquires a whole variety of meanings when we regard reality in Latin America and a great part of the Western world. The complete collapse of a status quo do not cease mutating due to the global crisis, urges us to consider this impasse as a concept – perhaps momentarily, maybe lasting – that is open to all possible shades and drifts.

In impasse, time passes by without faith in progressivism and indifferent to all totalisation. Suspension corresponds to a feeling of immobilisation/incomprehension of time, of an incapacity to seize the possibilities of a time bounded by all kinds of question marks. It is a time moved by a dialectics with no finality. However, while it rejects the argument that we stand before a new end of history (as was promoted a decade ago), there spreads a mood in which the exhaustion of a historical sense coexists with a splen- dorsus sublunary, the already-lived.

In what sense do we speak of historic exhaustion? In that possibilities seem to multiply to infinity, but the meaning of an action becomes unattainable; it dissipates. The possibility of opening (the opening of possibility) that is presented ‘as close at hand’, this attempt at an absolute question (a kind of and why not?), turns, in the tempo of impasse, into a dynamics of stagnation.

Finally, what do we mean when we speak of a return of the already-lived? A phantasmatic economy that drapes the present in memory, so that the past returns as pure remembrance, tribute or commemoration. This return of the same as memory presents itself as a closure in the face of a question that opened a new time and was, nevertheless, left disfigured. Disfigured in the sense that one tried to close it with the historical answers of the already-thought, neutralising it as a space of problematisation. And, yet, it persists, latent or postponed as unresolved tension. Thus, an incessant game of frustrations and expectations emerges in the impasse.

GOVERNMENTALITY AND NEW GOVERNANCE

From dictatorship to the triumph of neoliberalism – as part of a process that can be perceived across Latin America – we are experiencing, in Argentina, the establishment of a new type of government, whose operation no longer depends on the unique and pre-existing sovereignty of the state, but rather overflows in infinite instances of management originating from contingent couplings that can intervene in any hypothesis of conflict. The novelty resides in a permanent invention of political, legal, market, assistance and communication mechanisms that are articulated each time in order to deal with specific situations. Foucault calls this form of rooting of the government in society governmentality. It is the incorporation of monetary mechanisms, of mechanisms of administration and public opinion, media influence and the regulation of urban life that renders neoliberalism a form of immanent control over lives, their calculation and their market disposition; while, at the same time, it takes the development of liberties and initiatives as a supreme value. However, in Latin America this new government regime presented a singularity: forms of counter-insurgent terror between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s had a definitive role in its instauration. From that moment, the state is no longer the most consistent sovereign synthesis of society and blends in as an actor amongst us, inside the operation of more complex mechanisms of government (governmentalisation of the state).

We believe that due to the collective experiences that emerged in the context of social movements from the beginning of the 1990s until the early years of the new century – and subsequently caused a displacement of the ways of governing in many of the region’s countries, in the sense that they forced the interpretation of certain critical nuclei manifested by these new insurrections – a point of inflection inside the paradigm of neoliberal governmentality was generated. We will call this inflection new governance. It is formed by the irruption of the social dynamics that questioned the legitimacy of hardcore neoliberalism and the subsequent coming to power of ‘progressive’ governments in the Southern
The excessive process by the more novel social experiences of the last decade has not found enduring modes of public autonomous expression

Latin America: traversing the crisis

Thus, the current situation in Latin America makes two contributions to the critical reinterpretation of the crisis that affects the global scene. On the one hand, the overflow of images that anticipated the now generalised disaster of neoliberalism (especially in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina); and, on the other hand, having exposed the way in which the constitution of a political subjectivity from below allows for the possibility of a 'democratic traversing' of the crisis.

However, this interesting duplicity has been translated in a neo-developmentalism way by many governments of the continent who, while assuming the scenario of crisis, extract from it arguments that promote the state-national imaginary plagued by the regressive yearning for wage forms. (The explicit or implicit critique of the control exercised by the international banks being, in our opinion, one of the richest characteristics of the revolt.)

The lack of subtlety in the discourses that shape the current representatives of the ruling party in Argentina can be attributed to their insistence on abstractly opposing elements that are actually not antagonistic: 'liber-
also, they operate – in administrating everything common the imagination with new forms of mythological elements is given by the present.

Today, that refusal of labour (its politicisation, its rupture-creating materiality, its loss of the stage of happiness, its texture in the peripheral neighbourhoods (those who are in the city centre as well as in the old ‘industrial’) is included in the urban calculation of many who would rather participate in more or less illegal and informal networks than get a stable job. It can be seen that the exploitation of the youth that we do not imagine the possibility of employment, but indeed so many other ways of subsisting and risk ing their lives. We need to step forward as a search for self-managing or cooperative solutions in order to solve everyday existence. Likewise, developing and de-colonising tendencies integrate the city’s live liest communal and counter-cultural moments. They are minority components of an extended field of discourse and opens up to a much broader diagram (aff ective, imaginary, embodied) in the city as lived at the level of great public and media visibility, as well as on the streets, in domestic–informal economies, and even in our physiological organs (eyes, brain, kidneys).

Antagonism has not disappeared. It has been led to polarisation, but at the same time it has been dispersed in mud and promiscuity, to the point of being played as a possibility in every situation. That why we can insist on the true political value of collective (the more inadequate they are in relation to the surrounding discourse, the greater this value is) that refuse to disappear in the common sense that is articulated in the polarising calling. It is so hard for us to figure out what politics means and why it is, it is because of the ambiguity of the vertigo that make any categorical assertion impossible and render the exercise of evaluation even more complex. We must not react with conservatism, restoring the certainties that remain standing but, rather, immerse ourselves in this ambicient medium, fi lled with very real potentials that never manifest themselves but impede the defi nite closing of ‘reality’. Perhaps politics is, more and more, this inflection through which we give consistency to the situations in which we find ourselves, discovering the capacity to fabulate on our account. This labour requires a delicate craft. Translated by Anna-Maeve Holloway.

Colectivo Situaciones [trans. Situations Collective] are a Buenos Aires-based militant research collective with a long track record of participating in urban social movements, including work with the unemployed-workers’ movement of Solano; Hilltop Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant-lot Gardeners, an alternative school run by militant teachers. www.situaciones.org

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‘Everything must change so that everything can remain the same’

Notes on Obama’s energy plan

The Bush administration’s energy policy, with its evasions and invasions, has led to poverty, war and environmental destruction. But will Obama’s policy really be substantially different? Will this be change we can believe in? Turbulence asked George Caffentzis, a seasoned analyst of energy politics, to investigate.

President Obama’s oil/energy policy going to be different from the Bush Administration’s? My immediate answer to this question will be a firm No, followed by a more hesitant Yes. The reason for this ambivalence is simple: the failure of the Bush Administration to radically change the oil industry in its neoliberal image has made a transition from an oil-based energy regime inevitable, and the Obama Administration is responding to this inevitability. We are, consequently, in the midst of an epochal shift and so must revise our assessments of the political forces and debates of the past with some circumspection.

Before I examine both sides of this answer, we should be clear as to the two sets of oil/energy policies being discussed. The Bush policy paradigm’s premise is all too familiar: the ‘real’ energy crisis has nothing to do with the natural limits on energy resources, but it is due to the constraints on energy production imposed by government regulation and the OPEC cartel. First, energy production must be liberalised and the corrupt, dictatorial and terrorist-friendly OPEC cartel dissolved by US-backed coups (Venezuela) and invasions (Iraq and Iran). Then, according to the Bush folk, the free market can finally impose realistic prices on the energy commodities (which ought to be about half of the present ones). This in turn will stimulate the production of adequate supplies and a new round of spectacular growth of profits and wages.

Obama’s oil/energy policy, during the campaign and after his election, has an equally familiar premise. As he presented on January 27, 2009, ‘I will reverse our dependence on foreign oil while building a new energy economy that will create millions of jobs… America’s dependence on oil is one of the most serious threats that our nation has faced. It bankrolls dictators, pays for nuclear proliferation and funds both sides of our struggle against terrorism.’ In the long-term, this policy includes: a ‘clean tech’ Venture Capital Plan; Cap and Trade Clean Coal Technology development; stricter automobile gas-mileage standards; and cautious support for nuclear power electricity generation.

The energy policy he outlined in his budget proposal is supportive of a peculiar ‘national security’ autarky. (This emphasis on self-sufficiency is all the more peculiar when it comes from an almost mythically pro-globalisation figure like Obama.) Its logic is implicitly something like this: if the US were not so dependent on foreign oil, there would be less need for US troops to be sent to foreign territories to defend the US access to energy resources. Obama treats oil in a mercantile way, as the vital stuff of any contemporary economy, similar to the way gold was conceptualised in the 16th and 17th centuries.

A FIRM NO

In Obama’s paradigm the key question for oil policy is US dependency on foreign resources. Such a prism obscures the consequence of the present system of commodity production. A failure to start from the simple fact that oil is a basic commodity and the oil industry is devoted to making profits leads to two significant misrecognitions. Firstly, the US government is essentially involved in guaranteeing the functioning of the world market and the profitability of the oil industry and not access to the hydrocarbon stuff itself. Secondly, energy politics involves classes in conflict and not only competing corporations and conflicting nation states.

In brief, it leaves out the central players of contemporary life: workers, their demands and struggles. Somehow, when it comes to writing the history of petroleum, capitalism, the working class, and class conflict are frequently forgotten in a way that never happens with oil’s earthly hydrocarbon cousin, coal. Once we put profitability and working class struggle into the oil story, the plausibility of the National Security paradigm lessens, since the US military would be called upon to defend the profitability of international oil companies against the demands of workers around the world, even if the US did not import one drop of oil.

US troops will have to fight wars aplenty in the years to come, if the US government tries to play – for the oil industry in particular and for capitalism in general – the 21st century equivalent of the 19th century British Empire. For what started out in the 19th century as a tragedy, will be repeated in the 21st, not as farce, but as catastrophe. At the same time, it is not possible for the US government to ‘retreat’ from its role, without jeopardising the capitalist project itself. As his efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan initially indicate, Obama and his Administration show no interest in leading an effort to abandon this imperial, market-policing role.

Thus Obama, along with the other supporters of the National Security paradigm for oil policy, are offering up a questionable connection between energy import-substitution and the path of imperialism. As logicians would say, energy dependence might be a sufficient condition of imperialist oil politics, but it is not a necessary one. This is Obama’s dilemma then: he cannot reject the central role of the US in the control of the world market’s basic...
Let’s remember that the last period when capitalism was operating under a renewable energy regime, from the 16th to the end of the 18th century, was hardly an era of international peace and love. The value of the remaining oil ‘banked’ in the ground. This transition has been theorised, feared and prepared for by Third World (especially Saudi Arabian) capitalists ever since the first oil crisis of the 1970s. But what is to be done with respect to the oil producing workers? After all, the ‘down side’ of Hubbert’s Curve could, potentially, enable payback after a century of exploitation, forced displacements and enclosures in the oil regions. The capitalist class as a whole is unwilling to pay reparations to the peoples in the oil-producing areas whose land and lives have been so ill-used. Oil capital’s resistance to reparations is suggested by its horror, for example, at paying the Venezuelan state oil taxes and rents that will go into buying back land for campesinos whose parents or grandparents were expropriated decades ago. Capital wants to control that transfer of surplus value being envisioned in these discussions of transition, and without a neoliberal solution it is not clear that it can. Moreover, will the working class be a docile echo to capital’s concerns? Shouldn’t reparations be paid to the people of the Middle East, Indonesia, Mexico, Venezuela, Nigeria and countless other sites of petroleum extraction-based pollution? Will they simply sit in their oil wells waiting for their only hope for the return of stolen wealth snuffed out?

All the second phase of transition is concerned we should recognise that alternative energies have been given an angelic cast by decades of ‘alternative’ rhetoric contrasting them with blood-soaked hydrocarbons and apocalypse-threatening nuclear power. But let’s remember that the last period when capitalism was operating under a renewable energy regime, from the 16th to the end of the 18th century, was hardly an era of international peace and love. The genocide of the indigenous Americans, the African slave trade and the enclosures of the European peasantry occurred with the use of ‘alternative’ renewable energy. The view that a non-hydrocarbon future operated under a capitalist form of production will be dramatically less antagonistic is questionable. We saw an example of this kind of conflict of interest in the protests of Mexican city dwellers over the price of oil, however, by oil companies that was being sold for biofuel instead of for ‘homo-fuel’ (fuel for Homo sapiens).

In the present of our time we must remember that every energy source is not equally capable of generating surplus value (the ultimate end-use of energy under capitalism) and is highly flexible in its form of fuel that has a wide variety of chemical by-products and mixes with a certain type of worker. Solar, wind, water and tide energy will not immediately fit into the present productive apparatus to generate the same level of surplus value. The present is not an era of tremendous struggle in the production and reproduction process, for inevitably workers will be expected to ‘fit into’ the productive apparatus whatever it is. Finally, phase four presents the rub of the issue before us. Will this transition be organised on a capitalist basis or will the double crisis opened up on the levels of energy production and general social reproduction mark the beginning of another phase of poverty? Obama’s energy policy is premised on the first alternative; we’ve examined some of the unpleasant prospects that follow. The reality is that at this stage we require us to keep the second alternative open. When we investigate the possibilities before us we must defend our energy reproduction and break the promise that leads to ‘everything remaining the same’.

George Caffentzis is a member of the Midnight Notes Collective and co-editor of Midnight Oil: Work Energy War 1973–1992 and Aurora of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles in the Fourth World War.
Imagine the world around 1500. It was a polycentric and non-capitalist world. There were many civilisations, from China to sub-Saharan Africa, but none of them were globally dominant. At about this time, a radical change took place in global history that we can summarise in two points: the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit, and the fact that the West began to control the writing of global history. Between then and now, Western civilisation, in the sense we understand it today, was founded and formed.

There was no such thing as Western civilisation before the European Renaissance. Greece and Rome became part of the narrative of Western civilisation then, not before. With the Renaissance, a double movement began. First, the colonisation of time and the invention of the European Middle Ages. Second – with the emergence of Atlantic trade – the colonisation of space and the invention of New and Old Worlds. This separation, seemingly so natural today, is obviously historical: there could be no Old World without a New World.

In recent years, many on the left, including those in global social movements, have looked towards the ‘pink tide’ in Latin America as a new bastion of hope. We are talking of that wave of countries from Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil, to Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, whose recently elected, left-leaning governments have broken with the neoliberal policies of the ‘Washington Consensus’. But is there really an affinity between Latin American indigenous revolutionary visions or projects and those of ‘the left’? Walter Mignolo suggests that while indigenous concepts like ‘the communal’ may, superficially, seem very similar to the leftist notion of the commons, they have important differences. By overlooking these differences, or reading them from within leftist and European logics, we perpetuate forms of violence and coloniality that indigenous movements have been fighting against.

MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN

‘We tried that back in the early eighties... It’ll never work... For this reason, this reason and this reason.’ Sometime in the middle of 1998, a few people starting broaching the idea of an action in the heart of London’s financial district. It was easy for us to dismiss the idea. We’d been there and done it. Old cynical heads, we remembered the Stop the City demonstrations of 1983 and ’84 and we pooh-poohed the enthusiasm, the naivety, of younger bodies.

Of course, the ‘Carnival Against Capital’ - ‘J18’ – turned out not to be a significant event. In Britain, newspaper headlines screamed ‘anti-capitalist’ and the worldwide demonstrations that day built the momentum for the Seattle shutdown five months later.

Sometimes it’s hard to escape your own shadow. Analysis and past experience provide essential illumination, but they also cast a shadow that distorts or obscures optimism and openness. In particular, ‘sound judgement’ and healthy cynicism can blind you to the fact that situations change. Why was J18 a success, why did it resonate, when Stop the City did not? Because the context had changed. 1999 was not 1983. You can’t step in the same river twice.

The river has flowed some more. We don’t know what the important moments of 2010 or 2011 will be. Events will happen. And events will always exceed analysis. The question is: how will we recognise them? Whilst we’re focused on the potential and contradictions of struggles around climate change, will we appreciate the importance of a refinery workers’ strike – also messy, also full of contradictions? Sometimes you need to suspend your judgement, rein in cynicism. Our analysis always has to remain permeable to events.

In the 1990s members of The Free Association were active in the UK-based Class War Federation. They were part of a faction that tried to dissolve Class War in 1997. They then helped organise MayDay’98, a conference that sought to bring together an older generation of anti-capitalists with the burgeoning radical environmental and counter-globalisation movements in the UK. They write together at: www.freelyassociating.org
The left and the decolonial

The comuneros – the ethnic groups who have the image of indigenous nations prevailing among them (differentiated, for example, in their recourse to ‘the commons’ and ‘the communal’ origin) – whom he referred to as ‘the genius Moor’ – made up 40% of the indigenous population in the mid-1980s, when Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was Minister for Planning, primarily responsible for economic affairs, and Jeffrey Sachs one of his advisors. Patzi Paco’s proposal, published in December of 2005, aims at a de-conceptualisation of a ‘communal system’ as an alternative to the liberal constitution. For Patzi Paco, the liberal refers to what subsists from the advent of the modern/colonial state in Bolivia (and other regions of the non-communist world) and to the republic resulting from independence from Spain (controlled by an elite of criollos and mestizos), up until the election of Morales in December of 2008. One of his motivations was to redress the image of indigenous nations prevailing among the (Northern) masses – whom he works towards the hegemony of Western civilisation were the founders of Peoples’ Global Action (PGA), who consider that the indigenous fall ‘between two stools’ (that is, ‘white’ Bolivians) is any and all the coloniality frontal questions the capital not only as a historical practice, but also as the main element of the colonial process. This tension has everything to do with the differing genealogies of thought and practice from which concepts like ‘the commons’ and ‘the communal’ originate. Patxi Paco, for example, in their recourse to ‘the commons’. From the indigenous perspective, the communal may sound like an alternative ideological element in East Asia and from both systems of knowledge and epistemologies. The difference is that de-colonially frontally questions the capitalist economy, whereas de-Westernisation only questions who controls capitalism – the West or ‘emerging’ economies. ONE VERSION OF THE COMMUNAL

Felix Patzi Paco is a controversial figure in Bolivia, but an important voice in the current process of thinking and working toward a pluri-national state. Many conceptions of the importance of the indigenous status as ‘a social unitary state of pluri-national and communal law, free, independent, sovereign, democratic, intercultural, decentralised and with autonomies’. The recognition of Bolivia and Ecuador as states comprises of numerous distinct nations, each with its own distinctive language, forms of organisation, and knowledge. In Bolivia, the recognition of the indigenous nations has raised a great deal of excitement and controversy both within the two countries and internationally. It is, undoubtedly, both a recognition of the rights of indigenous people and of the indigenous movements have acquired, and a recognition of the differences that colonial domination and the independent state created in its wake have not managed to erase. Felix Patzi Paco was the Bolivian minister of education from 2006 to 2007, during which time he conceptualised a programme for the ‘decolonisation’ of education.

The Aymara and the Quechua

The Aymara and the Quechua have lived in the altipano, the high plains, for thousands of years. In Bolivia, the Aymara and Quechua constitute two of the largest indigenous nations, nations which themselves are comprised of heterogeneous communities. Aymara is recognised as one of Bolivia’s official languages: it must be taught in schools and is used on public television and radio. Six million people – in Bolivia and elsewhere – speak various dialects of Quechua. In recent years, indigenous movements have played pivotal roles in popular struggles, such as the Bolivian ‘Water War’ of 2000.

National constitutions and pluri-nationality

Both Ecuador and Bolivia have recently introduced radically new constitutions, in 2008 and 2009 respectively, in response to the communal movements that have been running the country since the mid-1980s. These new constitutions are built around the idea of a ‘communal system’ as an alternative to the liberal constitution. For Patzi Paco, the liberal refers to what subsists from the advent of the modern/colonial state in Bolivia (and other regions of the non-communist world) and to the republic resulting from independence from Spain (controlled by an elite of criollos and mestizos), up until the election of Morales in December of 2008. This tension has everything to do with the differing genealogies of thought and practice from which concepts like ‘the commons’ and ‘the communal’ originate. Patxi Paco, for example, in their recourse to ‘the commons’. From the indigenous perspective, the communal may sound like an alternative ideological element in East Asia and from both systems of knowledge and epistemologies. The difference is that de-colonially frontally questions the capitalist economy, whereas de-Westernisation only questions who controls capitalism – the West or ‘emerging’ economies.

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uncoupling affected by the liberal system than it in those neither liberal, nor Marxist, nor indigenous societies. This exists both in the country and in the city; other indigenous organisations in the lower classes; various indigenous groups that are neither liberal, nor Marxist, nor indígenistas.

There is, according to Patxi Pacho, an incongruence between the attention paid to surface symbols of the indigenous (whether or not they have cell phones or adapt symbols of non-indigenous culture), on the one hand, and the lack of interest in the ayllu, on the other. Few have questioned the fact that the ayllus has changed, but the indigenous ayllu as a whole throughout three hundred years of Spanish colonialism and two hundred years of Bolivian independence has never served as indication that, while they may have incorporated technologies and practices brought by Western modernisation, many indigenous communities maintain their indigenous way of thinking, of being modern. In fact, there are all sorts of professional and class designations among them, and there are indigenous proprietors who exploit indigenous labour. In a society where the communal co-exists with the liberal system and a market economy, industry owners have re-functionalised Andean reciprocity in order to obtain longer working hours for low salaries – 12 hours a day instead of eight.

If all social organisations consist of a core and an environment (or entorno), state multiculturalism’s rhetoric of ‘ multiculturalism’ can be explained as an attempt by the Bolivian state to co-opt the environment of the ayllu while ignoring or actively excluding its core, that is, its political and economic management. During the neoliberal government of Sánchez de Lozada in the 1990s, the state transformed the ‘plural’ and the ‘multi’, meaning plurilingüal and multicultural. Patxi Pacho’s book was published in 2004, before Evo Morales was elected president. However, I suspect that a similar critique of discourses of inclusion and ‘multiculturalism’ could be applied to the ‘Latin left’ in post-Lula Brazil. This is certainly CONAMAQ’s critique of Evo Morales, that is, of the left that now predominates in the Bolivian government. The constitution of ayllus and markas, which is CONAMAQ’s project, is precisely in response to the danger of being co-opted. Here resides the second strong motivation to bring to the foreground the communal system and to confront it as an alternative option to the liberal system.

But what exactly, then, is the communal? Patxi Pacho refers to collective rights to the use and management of resources, at the same time as he speaks of the ayllu as the core groups, families that share a language and ideals to share in the benefits of what is collectively produced. He makes clear that, while the communal has a communal foundation in agrarian societies in the Andes, these characteristics have survived and adapted well to contemporary conditions. The communal system is open to ‘persons’, indigenous or not, as well as to different types of ‘work’; in a communal system the distinction between owner and waged worker, as well as boss and employee in administrative organisations (banks, state organs, etc.), vanishes. To understand the scope of this proposal, it is necessary to clear our head of the indigenous ‘peasants’ equation that the coloniality of knowledge has imposed upon us, alongside the rhetoric of ‘development’. Moreover, the notion of ‘property’ is meaningless in a vision of society in which people are working to live and not living to work. It is in this context that Evo Morales has been promoting the concept of ‘the good living’ (sumak kawsay) in Quechua, sumak wawari in Aymara or buen vivir in Spanish). The good living – or, ‘to live in harmony’ – is an alternative to ‘development’. While development puts life at the service of growth and accumulation, buen vivir places life first, with institutions at the service of life. That is what ‘living in harmony’ (and not in competition) means.
‘GLOBAL COMMONS’ AND CLIMATE CHANGE

During the heyday of neoliberal globalisation, amidst its assault on all forms of public and common ownership of resources—the era of the ‘new enclosures’—an increasingly vocal part of the left started to conceptualise alternatives to neoliberalism and sometimes even capitalism in terms of commons: non-commodified forms of social cooperation and production. At the time commons seemed to offer a way out of the impasse between free-market capitalism and Eastern bloc-style state-capitalist planning.

In the last few years, however, the field of forces within which old and newly emerging commons operate has changed quite significantly. Increasingly, the idea of the commons seems to function less as an alternative to capitalist social relations, and more like their saviour. One example of this is the way the issue of climate change is being framed within a discourse of ‘global commons’. Influential neo-Keynesian economist Joseph Stiglitz asserts that global commons are threatened by a ‘tragedy of the commons’: that is, they are being overused because no one is charged for using or abusing them. Put simply, if polluting does not cost money, companies and individuals have an incentive to pollute. For Stiglitz, the problem cannot be solved by first assigning property rights, such as certificates that allow their owners to emit a certain amount of greenhouse gases, and then allowing markets to operate accordingly. This is the traditional neoliberal approach, but it won’t work for two reasons: first and primarily, because such enclosures often engender resistance; and, second, because they create incentives to pre-empt them by even more rapacious resource extraction. Stiglitz therefore proposes a global tax on carbon emissions to make people pay for the costs they impose on others through their polluting activities. This carbon tax—if set at an ‘appropriate rate’ and effectively enforced—would enable markets to be ‘efficient’ and would reduce emission to agreed targets. Stiglitz then argues that such a tax would create strong incentives for innovation in terms of energy efficiency and other ‘green’ technologies, enabling states to govern capitalist globalisation and promote virtuous, ‘sustainable’ growth.

This platform of management of the global commons is based on one key assumption: that capitalist disciplinary markets are a force for good, if only states are able to guide them onto a path of environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive growth. What this view forgets is that there is little evidence that global economic growth could be achieved with lower greenhouse gas emissions, in spite of increasingly energy-efficient new technologies, which in turn implies that alternatives might just be necessary to stop climate change. This raises the question of how we disentangle ourselves from the kind of conception of commons offered by Stiglitz, which allow solutions based on capitalist growth.

COMMON INTERESTS?

Commons also refer to common interests. To stay with the example of climate change, if there is any chance of significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions—without this implying some form of green authoritarianism—it is because there is a common interest in doing so. But common interests do not exist per se; they have to be constructed, a process that has historically proven to be riddled with difficulties—witness the feminist movement’s attempts to construct a ‘global sisterhood’; or the workers’ movement’s project of a ‘global proletariat’. This is partly the case because capitalism stratifies ‘women’, ‘workers’ or any other collective subject in and through hierarchies of wages and power. And therein lies the rub, because it is on the terrain of the construction of common global interests (not just around ecological issues, but also intellectual commons, energy commons, etc.) that the class struggle of the 21st century will be played out. This is where the centre of gravity of a new politics will lie.

There are thus two possibilities. Either: social movements will face up to the challenge and re-found the commons on values of social justice in spite of, and beyond, these capitalist hierarchies. Or: capital will seize the historical moment to use them to initiate a new round of accumulation (i.e. growth). The previous discussion of Stiglitz’s arguments highlights the dangers here. Because Stiglitz moves swiftly from the presumed tragedy of the global commons to the need to preserve and sustain them for the purpose of economic growth, similar arguments can be found in UN and World Bank reports on ‘sustainable development’, that oxymoron invented to couple environmental and ‘social’ sustainability to economic growth. Sustainable development is simply the sustainability of capital. This approach asserts capitalist growth as the sine qua non common interest of humanity. I call commons that are tied to capitalist growth distorted commons, where capital has successfully subordinated non-monetary values to its primary goal of accumulation.

The reason why common interests cannot simply be postulated is that we do not reproduce our livelihoods by way of postulations—we cannot eat them, in short. By and large, we reproduce our livelihoods by entering into relations with others, and by following the rules of these relations. To the extent that the rules that we follow in reproducing ourselves are the rules of capitalist production—i.e. to the extent that our reproduction depends

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After several decades of relentless neoliberal enclosures, the idea of ‘commons’ is enjoying a renaissance amongst some neo-Keynesian economists and commentators, while political scientist Elinor Ostrom has just been awarded the Nobel prize ‘for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons’. Massimo De Angelis explains why capital’s commons will always be distorted—because they are based upon social injustice—and why we can only reclaim the commons from capital by constructing common interests.
on money — we should question the operational value of any postulation of a common interest, because capitalist social relations imply precisely the existence of injustices, and not the opposite. These exist, on the one hand, between those who produce value, and those who appropriate it; and, on the other, between different layers of people who are not united by anything. And, it is not only pro-growth discourses that advocate the distorted commons that perpetuate these conflicts at the same time as they try to sell their idea that the same is true of environmental discourses that do not challenge the existing social relations of production through which we reproduce our livelihoods. Given that these assertions are somewhat abstract, let us try to substantiate them by testing a central environmental postulate on subjects who depend on capitalist markets for the reproduction of their livelihoods. Imagine I am a coal miner, or an oil worker. An environmental postulate tells me that our ‘common’ interest is to keep coal, or oil, in the ground because of long-run trends in greenhouse emissions. But this does not take into account that my family and I need food, shelter, clothing, etc. — not this coal or oil, and as well as in the long run. In order to satisfy those needs in the shorter term, I need to keep working as a coal miner or oil worker. Those making this postulation may or may not themselves have alternative sources of income from working in other industries; or they may even have chosen not to extract coal or oil for environmental reasons. However, their urging me to subscribe to this common interest by forgoing my livelihood demonstrates that my livelihood is not a matter of common interest. An environmental discourse not tied to questions of forms of livelihoods alternative to capital’s loops is one that regards my livelihood as expendable. Here we have an example of ‘distorted commons’, a common that is based on some form of social injustice. Ultimately, all environmental recommendations made without reference to the question of social justice and reproduction are arguments for distorted commons.

CAPITAL AND ‘DISTORTED COMMONS’

Capitalism as a socio-economic system has a schizophrenic relationship to the commons. On the one hand, capital is a social force that requires continuous enclosures; that is, the destruction and commodification of non-commodified producers and resources. However, there is also an extent to which capital has to accept the non-commodified and contribute to its constitution. The degree to which it does so, and how it does so, is fundamental for its own sustainability and preservation. But it also has fundamental consequences for the sustainability and preservation of the planet and of many communities. Capital has to reconcile itself to the commons to some degree precisely because capitalism — as the set of economic exchanges and practices mediated and measured by money and driven by self-interest, economic calculus and profit — is not all-encompassing. Capitalism is itself a subsystem of far larger systems necessary for the reproduction of life. This in turn implies that capitalism always finds itself trapped within a shell that constitutes its presuppositions, whether ecological or in terms of non-commodified life practices (non-remunerated childcare, education, etc.). Capital constantly strives to escape consumption, to overcome the barriers that constitute it and, through this, to preserve and reproduce itself through perpetual growth.

For capital to now reconcile itself to the commons in order to overcome barriers to its own development, it has to strategically drive peoples’ economic and political calculus to intervene and actively participate in the constitution of things shared. In other words, the forces of capital must participate in the constitution of the commons. And this is where capital’s troubles, and everybody else’s, begin. Let’s take an example. That capital has to engage with the realm of the shared, the non-commodified, is demonstrated by the fact that even the capitalist factory — the paradigmatic site of exploitation, struggle and the imposition of capital’s measure — is a form of common. Those individuals who go to work there have to be reconstituted with one another and with elements of nature in order for commodity production to occur. Here we encounter three elements that are constituent of any community, that is, a pooling of resources: workers do not need to engage in commodity exchanges with one another when accessing tools and information. Second, the social cooperation of labour: at the assembly line, each worker’s labour depends on the actions of the one before her. Third, a ‘community’ that creates rules and regulations and defines those of entry and exit: factory gates don’t just open for anyone, and not every kind of behaviour is allowed within them. Thus, we also see that these three constituent features of any commons — pooled resources, social cooperation of labour and community — apply to the capitalist factory in very specific, ‘distorted’ ways. The fact that resource-pooling and the social cooperation of labour are functional to the production of commodities implies the subordination of other aspects crucial for human reproduction (dignity, solidarity, ecological sustainability, happiness) to one ultimate aim: the accumulation of capital.

RECLAIMING COMMONS

So what about the problem of climate change? Changes in climate patterns are certainly going to impact on people across the globe, although these impacts are to a large extent graded by power and monetary affluence. In this sense, climate change transforms the pool of resources available to humanity to go about its social reproduction. For example, there will be less land available as sea-levels rise: communities in Bangladesh will be destroyed. As a result, climate change brings with it the need to change the social cooperation of labour and the governance of planetary commons. This is because the commons is crucial, because it constitutes a declaration of common ownership, hence of stewardship, responsibility and personal, as well as communal, ‘investment’. It is a first step towards reclaiming them. Critically, this practice of reclaiming is complicated by the fact that we reproduce our lives through many distorted and ‘non-distorted’ commons simultaneously. Which is where we return to common interests: we need to do more than simply postulate them — we need to construct them in struggle.

Beyond the Spectacular

In the late ‘90s, a movement emerged that was ready to name global capitalism as the enemy and employ large scale mobilising and direct action methods to challenge its agenda. It was not without political limitations but, at its best, it linked with movements of resistance in the oppressed countries and took its fight into communities under attack.

This development provided impetus to many social movements including those fighting poverty. In retrospect, as we reaped the benefits of this organisation, we underestimated the resilience of conservative misleadership in unions and social agencies, and their ability to contain resistance or divert it into safe forms that do not pose a threat to capitalism. ‘The long retreat is over’, we announced in 2001 as we watched the liberalisation package from the Ontario Government of the day, we have gone on fighting and even won victories but, as we watch major unions brokering austerity for workers in the present economic crisis and see networks of NGOs reducing resistance to poverty to polite ‘constructive engagement’ with governments, we need to realise that the mechanisms of control are a lot tighter than we thought they were.

Capitalism is in great crisis and the conditions are emerging to challenge it decisively, but a new front is required. The fact that resource-pooling and the social cooperation of labour are functional to the production of commodities implies the subordination of other aspects crucial for human reproduction (dignity, solidarity, ecological sustainability, happiness) to one ultimate aim: the accumulation of capital.

Ultimately, all environmental recommendations made without reference to the question of social justice and reproduction are arguments for distorted commons.
In this exclusive extract from her new book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit provides an alternative to the dominant narrative of human responses to disaster. Far from unleashing a Hobbesian war of all against all, unwelcome catastrophe can allow a welcome return to community, altruism and solidarity.

Who are you? Who are we?

In times of crisis, these are life and death questions.

Thousands of people survived Hurricane Katrina because grandsons or aunts or neighbours or complete strangers reached out to those in need all through the Gulf Coast, and because an armada of boat owners from the surrounding communities and as far away as Texas went into New Orleans to pull stranded people to safety. Hundreds of people died in the aftermath of Katrina because others, including police, vigilantes, high government officials and the media, decided that the people of New Orleans were too dangerous to allow them to evacuate the septic, drowned city, or to rescue them, even from hospitals. Some who attempted to flee were turned back at gunpoint or shot down. Rumours proliferated about mass rapes, mass murders, and mayhem that turned out later to be untrue, though the national media and New Orleans’s police chief believed and perpetrated those rumours during the crucial days when people were dying on rooftops, elevated highways and in crowded shelters and hospitals in the unbearable heat without adequate water, without food, without medicine and medical attention.

Those rumours led soldiers and others dispatched as rescuers to regard victims as enemies. Others were murdered as a result, but not by the people the media scrutinised. Beliefs matter—though more people act beautifully despite their beliefs than the reverse.

Katrina was an extreme version of what goes on in many disasters, where how you behave depends on whether you think your neighbours or fellow citizens are a greater threat than the havoc wrought by a disaster or a greater good than the property in houses and stores around you. (“Citizen,” here, means members of a city or community, not people in possession of legal citizenship in a nation.) What you believe shapes how you act. How you act results in life or death, for yourself or others, like everyday life, only more so.

Katrina was, like most disasters, also full of altruism: from young men who took it upon themselves to supply water, food, diapers, and protection to the strangers stranded with them, to people who sheltered neighbours, to the uncounted hundreds or thousands who set out in boats—armed, often, but also armed with compassion—to find those who were stranded in the stagnant waters and bring them to safety, to the two hundred thousand or more who volunteered to house complete strangers, mostly in their own homes, via the Internet site hurricanehousing.org in the weeks after, more persuaded by the pictures of suffering than the rumours of monstrousness, to the uncounted tens of thousands of volunteers who came to the Gulf Coast to rebuild and restore.

In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky or regrettably savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it. Decades of meticulous sociological research on behaviour in disasters, from the bombings of World War II to floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and storms across the North American continent and around the world have demonstrated this. But belief lags behind, and often the worst behaviour in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism. From 1906 San Francisco to 2005 New Orleans, innocents have been killed by people who believed that their victims were the criminals and they themselves were the protectors of the shaken order. Belief matters.

“Today Cain is still killing his brother” proclaims a faded church mural on wood siding in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans that was so devastated by the failure of the government levees. In quick succession, the Book of Genesis gives us the creation of the universe, the illicit acquisition of knowledge, the expulsion from Paradise, and the slaying of Abel by Cain, a second fall from grace. The creation of the universe, the illicit acquisition of knowledge, the expulsion from Paradise, and the slaying of Abel by Cain is the very concept of society and of life and death questions. In times of crisis, these are the hardest questions.

The very concept of society rests on the idea of networks of affinity and solidarity. What are these networks made of? What holds them together? What keeps them from breaking down? How do they function? How do they move? What is their purpose? These are the perennial social questions: are we beholden to each other, must we take care of each other, or is it every man for himself? Most traditional societies have deep entrenched commitments and connections between people, families, and groups. The very concept of society rests on the idea of networks of affinity and affection, and the freestanding individual exists largely as an outcast or exile.

Mobile and individualistic modern societies shed some of these old bonds and vacillate about taking on others, particularly those expressed through economic arrangements—particularly provisions for the aged and vulnerable, the mitigation of poverty and desperation—the keeping of one’s brothers and sisters. The argument against such keeping is often framed as an argument about human nature: we are essentially selfish, and because you will not care for me, I cannot care for you. I will not feed
remarkable reprieve from it, a view into intensifies this; sometimes it provides a social disaster. Sometimes disaster paradise of unbroken solidarities.

If I am not my brother's keeper, then is independent of yours or pitted against it to mine – if I believe that my wellbeing is great preponderance – to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposeful- work we desire and are each our sisters' and brothers' keepers. I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, shortly after a big hurricane tore up the city in October of 2003. The man in charge of taking me around told me about the hurricane – not the winds at more than a hundred miles an hour that tore up trees, roofs, telephone poles, not the seas that rose nearly ten feet, but the neighbours. He spoke of the few days when everything was disrupted and lit up with happiness as he did so. In his neighbourhood all the people had come out of their houses to speak with each other, aid each other, to improvise a community kitchen, make sure the elders were okay, and spend time together, no longer strangers. Everybody woke up the next morning and everything was different,' he mused. 'There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a street party, but everyone out at once – it was a place three weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Or loved not the earthquake, the Loma Prieta earthquake that took place three weeks before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. It reminded me of how many of us in the San Francisco Bay Area had loved the Loma Prieta earthquake which took place on October 17, 1989. It was a major earthquake in an area inhabited by millions). When the subject of the earthquake came up with a new acquaintance the other day, she too glanced with recollection about how her San Francisco neighbourhood had, during the days the power was off, cooked up all its thawing frozen food, held barbecues on the street, how grandioses everyone had been, how people from all walks of life had mixed in candlelit bars that became community imagination. Without really knowing it, we have inherited the dilemma which, around May 1968, separated the New Social Movements from the old. The latter concentrated on the problem of the central front, thus affirming labour and hence state power. The New Social Movements, on the other hand, placed their trust in the multiplicity of fronts, affirmed the right of non-labour and hence the anti-power of minorities. We think both of these positions together, and thus call ourselves movement of movements. Our weakness is that we have not taken this thought to its conclusion. We do not yet know how what is common to all fronts can be articulated and organised. We do not yet know what the power of anti-power is. The inevitable affirmation of multiplicity obscures the inevitability of a strategic decision.

Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what is seen there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times, and in other extraordinary times.
There was no electricity, all the stores were closed, no one had access to media. The consequence was that everyone poured out into the street to bear witness. Not quite a party, but everyone out at once - it was a sense of happiness that we didn’t know each other.

NATURAL LAWS, SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND THE LIMITS TO GROWTH

In the 1990s, I thought that climate change, in the following decade, would become more discernible from background climate variability - but would translate into a relatively slow and distant problem for humanity. I thought that the current mass extinction of species, the sixth in Earth’s history, would pose more immediate problems for larger numbers of people. It turns out that, like many other scientists and activists, I underestimated both the shorter-term magnitude of the impacts of increasing the concentration of greenhouse gases (like carbon dioxide) in the atmosphere and the rate at which such changes are taking place. This was, in part, because of other under-predictions of the sheer quantity of fossil fuels that would be burnt globally: current emissions are higher than even the most pessimistic scenarios have predicted back then. In addition, we’ve discovered that ecosystems, and the people who depend most directly on them, are especially vulnerable to relatively small climatic changes, often with devastating consequences. Conversely, ecosystems appear relatively resilient to the loss of individual species, because rather than impoverished overall, at least ecologically. A more difficult version of that strange pleasure in disaster emerged after September 11, 2001, when many Americans seemed stirred, moved, and motivated by the newfound sense of urgency, purpose, solidarity and danger that they had encountered. They abolished what had happened, but they clearly relished who they briefly became. What is this feeling that crops up in so many disasters? After the Loma Prieta quake, I began to wonder about it. After 9/11, I began to see how strange it was that, they matter as we enter an era when questions about everyday life outstrip disaster, about social possibilities and human natures every day, arise again, as they often have in turbulent times.

When I ask people about the disasters they have lived through, I find on many faces that retrospective basking, as they recount gorgeous Canadian snowstorms, midwestern snow days, New York blackouts, about heat in southern India, fire in New Mexico, earlier hurricanes in Louisiana, an economic collapse in Argentina, earthquakes in California and Mexico, and a strange pleasure overall. It was the joy on their faces that surprised me. And with those whom I have read rather than spoken to, it was the joy of their words that surprised me. It should not be so, is not so, in the familiar version of what disaster brings, and yet it is, rising from rubble, coming out of c. 1,000 years of storms and floods. The joys of a measure of the otherwise neglected desires, desires for public life and civil society, for inclusion, purpose, and possibility. Disasters are most basically, terrible, tragic and grievous, and no matter what positive side effects and possibilities they produce, they are not to be desired. But by the same measure, those side effects should not be ignored because they arise amid devastation. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage and ashes. And the point is not to welcome disasters. They do not create these gifts, but they are one channel through which they arrive. Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what is seen there matters everywhere, in ordinary times, and in extraordinary times.

Most social change is chosen – you want to belong to a co-op, you believe in social safety nets or community support. But disaster doesn’t sort us out by preferences; it drags us into emergencies that require us to act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative to survive ourselves and our neighbours, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living. The positive emotions that arise when those circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaning- ful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding. The only question is how in a world where society presents these goals from being achieved. The structure is also ideological, a political order that most serves the wealthy and powerful but shapes all of our lives, reinforced as the conventional wisdom disseminated by the media, from news hours to disaster movies. The facets of that ideology have been called individualism, capitalism and Social Darwinism, and have appeared in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Malthus, as well as the work of most conventional contemporary economists, who presume we can improve our lot through rational choices and refrain from looking at the ways a system skewed to that end damages much else. But disaster brings out our natural and desire for our well-being. Disaster demonstrates this, since among the factors determining whether you will live or die are the health of your immediate community and the justness of your society. We need ties to survive, but they, along with purposefulness, immediacy and agency, also give us joy – the startling, sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors. These accounts demonstrate that the citizens any paradise would need – the people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough – already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise nowadays arises in hell, it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.

My exploration of disaster has led me from an investigation of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco to the
The language of therapy speaks almost exclusively of the consequence of disaster as trauma, suggesting a humanity that is unbearably fragile, a self that does not act but is acted upon, the most basic recipe of the victim.

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Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian, and activist from San Francisco. She is the author of twelve books, including Hope in the Dark, a 2004 book rethinking how history and popular power work, Wonderland: A History of Walking in the Modern World, and The Faraway Nearby. The 1994 book investigating the nuclear and Indian wars of the American west and the reasons for failure of most systems, its opposite. A regular contributor to the (common) potency of thought. This is the paradise entered through hell.

The word 

Catastrophe engineering. It is no coincidence happens. One place where his current 

propaganda is like 

and it’s not. It was magic nonetheless, the reappearance of these old heavens is an afflication, but its opposite. This is the paradise entered through hell.

Tomdispatch.com

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What were you wrong

Ten years after the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, *Turbulence* invited people from across the global movement to tell us what they were wrong about back then, at t-10. Here, editor Rodrigo Nunes explains the reasoning behind it.
The year 2009 will go down in history as the time of the greatest capitalist crisis in almost a century; it will perhaps also be recorded as the period when the ecological crisis positively established itself as a widespread concern, even if one that means very different things for different groups. It is also the tenth anniversary of the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, which made of 1999 the year when the ‘anti-’ or ‘alter-globalisation’ movement, or the ‘movement of movements’, or the ‘global wave’ became a visible phenomenon across the world.

Clearly, one reason for the lack of anniversary celebration is the lack of much to celebrate. If anything, the problems highlighted then are more pressing now, the threats they pose more acute. And while the danger grows, the redeeming power seems to recede. It is a significant point that Olivier de Marcellus says in this issue, ‘faced with literally “the chance of a lifetime”, we are amazingly unprepared’. The mobilisation that was widespread in the years immediately preceding and following Seattle, the wealth of ideas, the inventiveness, determination and hope of those days seem much weaker now. We are at a moment when it would be tempting to look back on the debates of a decade ago and say that time has proved we were right; the problem is it is difficult to find that ‘we’ from which to speak.

For this issue, Turbulence invited individuals and groups who were active in various ways at the time of the ‘global wave’ to respond to one question: ‘What were you wrong about ten years ago?’ Some have treated this as a question concerning that cycle as a whole, in its global dimension. Others, as one concerning local or national realities, or the practices of certain groups and movement, they were involved in – or even as a truly individual question.

To say ‘active in various ways’ is more than the usual, obligatory reference to the diversity of the social composition of that cycle. It advances one hypothesis about the period: that it was not a movement, but a moment – and that perhaps the problem was the confusion between the two. This distinction implies that what happened then was that globalisation and capitalism was in opposition for the first time, for different social forces all over the world to be aware of their experiences, their struggles, their overlays, mutual effects and differences (in terms of immediate targets, tactics, organisational forms, strategic horizons), and communicate in ways that allowed them to both support and learn from each other and converge at common points.

It is not, then, that the ‘movement’ is dead; the ‘movement’ never existed. It was a mirage, produced in a moment of hugely and rapidly increased capacity of communication and coordination, and wide-eyed astonishment at a just-discovered capacity to produce moments of convergence whose collective power was much greater than the sum of its parts. What ended up becoming tagged as a ‘movement’, then – mostly the cycle of summit protests and counter-summit – was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. It was a much deeper, wider web of connections, both direct (as when groups engaged in communication and coordination with each other) and indirect (when a story or experience inspired something somewhere else that produced those connections). And these connections existed among initiatives that were sometimes very local, sometimes very different, and sometimes even contradictory.

To speak of a mirage is not to dismiss some very real effects. Every convergence fed back into these innovations, creating and reinforcing connections, and above all strengthening what was most unique about this moment: the fact that it posed itself as global as such. There had been other cycles of struggle that had spread across the world – those only the most visible side of what was happening all over the world – and so treated more and more as the ‘real deal’. ‘Convergence’ became itself rather than a strategic tool and a series of tactical moments in what should be the constitution of ‘another world’.

The problem is that it is impossible to inhabit this global dimension as such. Firstly, because such convergences do not make a movement. However crucial it may be to maintain open the door to the debate on singular times and places, such potential exists only as a consequence of capacity built at the local level, not as its substitute. Communication at a global level is possible only to the extent that there are active local struggles. Secondly, because privileging convergence as an attempt to tap resources from local capacity-building, when the point should be precisely that the former reinforce the latter. If they do not, this ultimately means that an individual, rather than being the necessary other half of building autonomy, replaces it, and often sabotages initiatives that were sometimes very local, sometimes very different, and sometimes even contradictory.

As a consequence, many made the choice of disengaging from the ‘global’ dimension altogether, directing their energies back to the local level. In other cases, investment in the ‘global’ at the expense of the local would lead to a disconnection between ‘politics’ and ‘life’ (as both Amador Fernández-Salvador and the former members of Precarias a la Deriva describe), while the danger of either burn-out, or a replacement of slow-building, built consistency for the media (as Trevor Nwana points out).

Treated in this way, convergences would end up operating largely on the representative level (even if despite themselves): expressing a dissent that had no way of enforcing itself. This kind of strategy for activity has some effectiveness in a parliamentary democracy, provided it corresponds to a large enough constituency to constitute a relevant electoral variable. This highlights another reason why the global is uninhabitable, at least for politics’ capacity itself. It allows little space for strength to be shown or demands to be placed, since there is no-one to directly address.

Of course, some respondents highlight, there is another, very specific reason why this global dimension would become increasingly invisible: the lobe in which that moment unfolded shifted significantly after 9/11 and the onset of the ‘War on Terror’. Not only was the main focus of conflict moved elsewhere – ‘good’ versus ‘rogue’ states, ‘fundamentalism’ versus ‘democracy’, ‘Islam’ versus the West –, it was also displaced to a level of confrontation no movements were willing or able to occupy at the time.

What is more, the combination of a constantly reinforced atmosphere of alarm, and the spread of legislative and policing measures that crept into all spheres and served to criminalise social movements, had the subjective impact of reinforcing isolation, fear and feelings of impotence. The joy that had been discovered in collective action (even at a distance), and which had been one of the most important glues keeping that moment together, became harder to attain. The hangovers from earlier moments of excess became tinged with darker, more anxious hues.

The criticisms and questions levied here are retrospective. Speaking of the cycle fizzing out, as though that were purely the result of its internal difficulties, or imagining how things could have been different in other circumstances, might all seem rather speculative. We should be concerned with the present, not the past.

Why, then, ask the question: ‘What were you wrong about?’ Precisely because it is one way to bring out what is distinctive about the present. We must avoid turning the fact that ‘we’ have been confirmed right in so much of our analyses into an opportunity for simply turning back the clock and assuming we must have been right about everything else. The worst possible result of this would be to allow the resurrection of sterile oppositions and false dichotomies, the re-entrenchment of positions and identifications and the closing of discussions that need to start again. The return to a ‘we’ whose disappearance (or pragmatic existence, at the very least) is necessary to question and work through; whose narcissistic resurrection could eventually ward off the constitution of a new one. In short, everything that could hinder the emergence of a new common ground.

What we are proposing could then, perhaps, be described as a therapeutic exercise: one that enables a collective evaluation of what has changed in our movement and the world these past ten years, and opens up the possibility of a new vulnerability that is the pre-condition for new dialogues. In more senses than one, this is an analytic exercise, or the beginning of one. A difficult, but necessary, attempt to transform the work of mourning the struggles of the last decade into a joyful affirmation of the persistence of their promise in the present.

Rodrigo Nunes, philosopher, was doing local organisng ten years ago, until he stumbled upon a ‘global movement’ when the World Social Forum moved into his backyard in Porto Alegre. Today he is back in Brazil, after many years in the UK. He is a member of the editorial collective of Turbulence.
Until recently, anyone who suggested nationalising the banks would have been derided as a ‘quack’ and a ‘crank’, as lacking the most basic understanding of the functioning of a ‘complex, globalised world’. The grip of ‘orthodoxy’ disqualified the idea, and many more, without the need even to offer a counter-argument. And yet, in this time of intersecting crises, when it seems like everything could, and should, have changed, it paradoxically feels as though very little has. Individuals and companies have hunkered down to try and ride out the crisis. Nationalisations and government spending have been used to prevent change, not initiate it. Anger and protest have erupted around different aspects of the crises, but no common or consistent reaction has seemed able to cohere. We appear unable to move on. For many years, social movements could meet and recognise one another on the common ground of rejecting neoliberalism, society’s old middle ground – those discourses and practices that defined the centre of the political field. The crisis of the middle has meant a crumbling of the common. And what now? Will neoliberalism continue to stumble on without direction, zombie-like? Or, is it time for something completely different?