

Ecological and social planning and transition

Thursday 23 April 2020, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2020).

The semiannual French review *Les Possibles*, a publication of Attac France, in its most recent issue (23) features a number of articles on planning for the ecological and social transition. Most are addressed to the issue of socialist planning vs. capitalist markets that was prominent in the debates of 20th century socialism. The [contribution by Michael Löwy](#) puts this debate in the ecosocialist framework that has emerged in this century. This translation by Richard Filder (Life on the Left blog).

The need for economic planning in any serious and radical process of socio-ecological transition is winning greater acceptance, in contrast to the traditional positions of the Green parties, favorable to an ecological variant of “market economy,” that is, “green capitalism.”

In her latest book, Naomi Klein observes that any serious reaction to the climate threat “involves recovering an art that has been relentlessly vilified during these decades of market fundamentalism: planning.” This includes, in her view, industrial planning, land use planning, agricultural planning, employment planning for workers whose occupations are made obsolescent by the transition, etc. “This means bringing back the idea of planning our economies based on collective priorities rather than profitability....” [1]

Democratic planning

The socio-ecological transition — towards an ecosocialist alternative — implies public control of the principal means of production and democratic planning. Decisions concerning investment and technological change must be taken away from the banks and capitalist businesses, if we want them to serve the common good of society and respect for the environment.

Who should make these decisions? Socialists often responded: “the workers.” In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx defines socialism as a society of “the associated producers rationally regulating their interchange (*Stoffwechsel*) with Nature.” However, in Volume I of *Capital*, we find a broader approach: socialism is conceived as “an association of free men, working with the means of production (*gemeinschaftlichen*) held in common.” This is a much more appropriate concept: production and consumption must be organized rationally not only by the “producers” but also by consumers and, in fact, the whole of society, the productive or “unproductive” population: students, youth, women (and men) homemakers, retired persons, etc.

In this sense, society as a whole will be free to democratically choose the productive lines to be promoted and the level of resources that should be invested in education, health or culture. The prices of goods themselves would no longer respond to the law of supply and demand, but would be determined as much as possible according to social, political and ecological criteria.

Far from being “despotic” in itself, democratic planning is the exercise of the free decision-making of the whole of society — a necessary exercise to free ourselves from the alienating and reified “economic laws” and “iron cages” within capitalist and bureaucratic structures. Democratic planning associated with a reduction of working time would be a considerable step forward by

humanity towards what Marx called “the realm of freedom”: the increase in free time is in fact a condition for the participation of workers in democratic discussion and management of the economy and society.

Advocates of the free market tirelessly use the failure of Soviet planning to justify their categorical opposition to any form of organized economy. We know, without getting into a discussion on the successes and failures of the Soviet experience, that it was obviously a form of “dictatorship over needs,” to quote the expression used by György Markus and his colleagues from the Budapest School: an undemocratic and authoritarian system which gave a monopoly over decisions to a small oligarchy of techno-bureaucrats. It was not planning that led to the dictatorship. It was the growing limitation of democracy within the Soviet state and the establishment of totalitarian bureaucratic power after Lenin’s death that gave rise to an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic planning system. If socialism is to be defined as control of production processes by workers and the general population, the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors fell far short of this definition.

The failure of the USSR illustrates the limits and contradictions of bureaucratic planning with its flagrant ineffectiveness and arbitrariness: it cannot serve as an argument against the application of genuinely democratic planning. The socialist conception of planning is nothing other than the radical democratization of the economy: if political decisions should not be made by a small elite of leaders, why not apply the same principle to economic decisions? The question of the balance between market and planning mechanisms is undoubtedly a complex issue: during the first phases of the new society, markets will certainly still occupy a significant place, but as the transition to socialism progresses, planning will become increasingly important.

In the capitalist system use value is only a means — and often a device — subordinated to exchange value and profitability (this in fact explains why there are so many products in our society without any utility). In a planned socialist economy, the production of goods and services responds only to the criterion of use value, which entails spectacular economic, social and ecological consequences.

Of course, democratic planning concerns the major economic choices and not the administration of local restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, small shops, craft businesses or services. Likewise, it is important to emphasize that planning does not contradict the self-management of workers in their production units. Whereas the decision to convert, for example, an automobile factory to bus or rail vehicle production would be up to society as a whole; the internal organization and operation of the factory would be managed democratically by the workers themselves. There has been much debate over the “centralized” or “decentralized” nature of planning, but the important thing remains democratic control of the plan at all levels — local, regional, national, continental and, hopefully, global — since ecological issues such as climate warming are global and can only be addressed at that level. This proposal could be called “comprehensive democratic planning.” Even at this level, it is planning which contrasts with what is often described as “central planning” because economic and social decisions are not taken by any “center” but democratically determined by the populations concerned.

There would, of course, be tensions and contradictions between self-governing institutions and local democratic administrations and other larger social groups. Negotiating mechanisms can help resolve many such conflicts, but in the final analysis, it will be up to the larger groups involved, and only if they are in the majority, to exercise their right to impose their opinions. To give an example: a self-managed factory decides to dump its toxic waste in a river. The population of an entire region is threatened by this pollution. It may then, following a democratic debate, decide that the production of this unit must be stopped until a satisfactory solution to control its waste is found. Ideally, in an ecosocialist society, the factory workers themselves will have sufficient ecological awareness to avoid making decisions that are dangerous for the environment and the health of the local

population. However, the fact of introducing methods to guarantee the decision-making power of the population to defend the most general interests, as in the previous example, does not mean that questions concerning internal management should not be submitted to the citizens at the level of the factory, school, neighborhood, hospital or village.

Ecosocialist planning must be based on a democratic and pluralist debate, at each level of decision. Organized in the form of parties, platforms or any other political movement, the delegates of the planning bodies are elected and the various proposals are presented to everyone they concern. In other words, representative democracy must be enriched — and improved — by direct democracy which allows people to choose directly — locally, nationally and, ultimately, internationally — between different proposals. The whole population would then make decisions on free public transit, on a special tax paid by car owners to subsidize public transport, on the subsidization of solar energy to make it competitive with fossil energy, on the reduction of the hours of work to 30, 25 hours a week or less, even if this entails a reduction in production.

The democratic nature of planning does not make it incompatible with the participation of experts whose role is not to decide, but to present their arguments — often different, even opposed — during the democratic decision-making process. As Ernest Mandel said:

“Governments, parties, planning boards, scientists, technocrats or whoever can make suggestions, put forward proposals, try to influence people. To prevent them from doing so would be to restrict political freedom. But under a multi-party system, such proposals will never be unanimous: people will have the choice between coherent alternatives. And the right and power to decide should be in the hands of the majority of producers / consumers / citizens, not of anybody else. What is paternalist or despotic about that?” [2]

A question arises: what guarantee do we have that people will make the right choices, those that protect the environment, even if the price to pay is to change part of their consumption habits? There is no such “guarantee,” only the reasonable prospect that the rationality of democratic decisions will triumph once the fetishism of consumer goods has been abolished. People will of course make mistakes by making bad choices, but don’t the experts make mistakes themselves? It is impossible to imagine the construction of a new society without the majority of the people having reached a great socialist and ecological awareness thanks to their struggles, their self-education and their social experience. So, it is reasonable to believe that serious errors — including decisions inconsistent with environmental needs — will be corrected. In any case, one wonders if the alternatives — the ruthless market, an ecological dictatorship of “experts” — are not much more dangerous than the democratic process, with all its limits.

Admittedly, for planning to work, there must be executive and technical bodies capable of implementing decisions, but their authority would be limited by the permanent and democratic control exercised by the lower levels, where workers’ self-management takes place in the process of democratic administration. It cannot be expected, of course, that the majority of the population will spend all of their free time in self-management or participatory meetings. As Ernest Mandel remarked: “Self-administration does not entail the disappearance of delegation. It combines decision-making by the citizens with stricter control of delegates by their respective electorate.” [3]

A long process not free from contradictions

The transition from the “destructive progress” of the capitalist system to ecosocialism is a historic process, a revolutionary and constant transformation of society, culture and mentalities — and politics in the broad sense, as defined above, is undeniably at the heart of this process. It is important to specify that such an evolution cannot be initiated without a revolutionary change in the

social and political structures and without the active support to the ecosocialist program by a large majority of the population. Socialist and ecological awareness is a process whose decisive factors are the collective experience and struggles of the population, which, starting from partial confrontations at the local level, progress towards the prospect of a radical change in society. This transition would lead not only to a new mode of production and a democratic and egalitarian society but also to an alternative way of life, a truly ecosocialist civilization beyond the imperium of money with its consumption patterns artificially induced by advertising and its limitless production of useless and/or environmentally harmful goods.

Some environmentalists believe that the only alternative to productivism is to stop growth as a whole, or to replace it with negative growth — called in France “degrowth.” To do this, it is necessary to drastically reduce the excessive level of consumption of the population and to give up individual houses, central heating and washing machines, among other things, in order to reduce energy consumption by half. As these and other similarly draconian austerity measures may be very unpopular, some advocates of degrowth play with the idea of a kind of “ecological dictatorship.” [4] Against such pessimistic points of view, some socialists display an optimism which leads them to think that technical progress and the use of renewable energy sources will allow unlimited growth and prosperity so that everyone receives “according to their needs.”

It seems to me that these two schools share a purely quantitative conception of “growth” — positive or negative — and of the development of the productive forces. I think there is a third posture that seems more appropriate to me: a real qualitative transformation of development. This implies putting an end to the monstrous waste of resources caused by capitalism, which is based on the large-scale production of useless and/or harmful products. The arms industry is a good example, as are all these “products” manufactured in the capitalist system — with their planned obsolescence — which have no other purpose than to create profits for big companies.

The question is not “excessive consumption” in the abstract, but rather the dominant type of consumption whose main characteristics are: ostensible property, massive waste, obsessive accumulation of goods and the compulsive acquisition of pseudo-novelties imposed by “fashion.” A new society would orient production towards meeting authentic needs, starting with what could be described as “biblical” — water, food, clothing and housing — but including essential services: health, education, culture and transportation.

It is obvious that the countries where these needs are far from being met, that is to say the countries of the southern hemisphere, will have to “develop” much more — build railways, hospitals, sewers and other infrastructures — than industrialized countries, but this should be compatible with a production system based on renewable energy and therefore not harmful to the environment. These countries will need to produce large quantities of food for their populations already hit by famine, but — as the farmers’ movements organized at an international level by the Via Campesina network have argued for years — this is an objective much easier to reach through organic peasant farming organized by family units, cooperatives or collective farms, than by the destructive and antisocial methods of industrial agrobusiness with its intensive use of pesticides, chemical substances and GMOs.

The present system of odious debt and imperialist exploitation of the resources of the South by the capitalist and industrialized countries would give way to a surge of technical and economic support from the North to the South. There would be no need — as some Puritan and ascetic ecologists seem to believe — to reduce, in absolute terms, the standard of living of the European or North American populations. These populations should simply get rid of useless products, those which do not meet any real need and whose obsessive consumption is upheld by the capitalist system. While reducing their consumption, they would redefine the concept of standard of living to make way for a lifestyle

that is actually richer.

How to distinguish authentic needs from artificial, false or simulated needs? The advertising industry — which exerts its influence on needs through mental manipulation — has penetrated into all spheres of human life in modern capitalist societies. Everything is shaped according to its rules, not only food and clothing, but also areas as diverse as sport, culture, religion and politics. Advertising has invaded our streets, our mailboxes, our television screens, our newspapers and our landscapes in an insidious, permanent and aggressive manner. This sector contributes directly to conspicuous and compulsive consumption habits. In addition, it leads to a phenomenal waste of oil, electricity, labour time, paper and chemical substances, among other raw materials — all paid for by consumers. It is a branch of “production” which is not only useless from the human point of view, but which is also at odds with real social needs. While advertising is an indispensable dimension in a capitalist market economy, it would have no place in a society in transition to socialism. It would be replaced by information on the products and services provided by consumer associations. The criterion for distinguishing an authentic need from an artificial need would be its permanence after the removal of advertising. It is clear that for some time the past habits of consumption will persist because no one has the right to tell people what they need. The change in consumption models is an historical process and an educational challenge.

Certain products, such as the private car, raise more complex problems. Passenger cars are a public nuisance. Globally, they kill or maim hundreds of thousands of people each year. They pollute the air in big cities — with harmful consequences for the health of children and the elderly — and they contribute considerably to climate change. However, the car satisfies real needs under the current conditions of capitalism. In European cities where the authorities are concerned about the environment, some local experiments — approved by the majority of the population — show that it is possible to gradually limit the place of the private car in favour of buses and trams. In a process of transition to ecosocialism, public transit would be widespread and free — on land as well as underground — while paths would be protected for pedestrians and cyclists. Consequently, the private car would play a much less important role than in bourgeois society where the car has become a fetish product promoted by insistent and aggressive advertising. The car is a symbol of prestige, a sign of identity (in the United States, the driver's license is the recognized identity card). It is at the heart of personal, social and erotic life. In this transition to a new society, it will be much easier to drastically reduce over-the-road transportation of commodities — a source of tragic accidents and excessive pollution — and to replace it with rail or container transport. Only the absurd logic of capitalist “competitiveness” explains the present development of truck transportation.

To these proposals, the pessimists will answer: yes, but individuals are motivated by infinite aspirations and desires which must be controlled, analyzed, suppressed and even repressed if necessary. Democracy could then be subject to certain restrictions. Yet ecosocialism is based on a reasonable assumption, previously advanced by Marx: the predominance of “being” over “having” in a non-capitalist society, that is to say the primacy of free time over the desire to own countless objects: personal achievement through real activities, cultural, sports, recreational, scientific, erotic, artistic and political.

The fetishism of the commodity encourages compulsive buying through the ideology and advertising specific to the capitalist system. There is no evidence that this is part of “eternal human nature.” Ernest Mandel pointed out:

“The continual accumulation of more and more goods (with declining ‘marginal utility’) is by no means a universal or even predominant feature of human behaviour. The development of talents and inclinations for their own sake; the protection of health and

life; care for children; the development of rich social relations as a prerequisite of mental stability and happiness — all these become major motivations once basic material needs have been satisfied.” [5]

As we mentioned above, this does not mean, especially during the transition period, that conflicts will be non-existent: between environmental protection needs and social needs, between ecological obligations and the need to develop basic infrastructures, especially in poor countries, between popular consumption habits and lack of resources. A society without social classes is not a society without contradictions or conflicts. These are inevitable: it will be the role of democratic planning, from an ecosocialist perspective freed from the constraints of capital and profit, to resolve them through open and pluralistic discussions leading society itself to take decisions. Such a democracy, common and participative, is the only way, not to avoid making errors, but to correct them through the social collectivity itself.

To dream of a green socialism or even, in the words of some, of a solar communism, and to fight for this dream, does not mean that we are not trying to implement concrete and urgent reforms. While we should not have illusions about “clean capitalism,” we must nevertheless try to gain time and impose on the public authorities some elementary changes: a general moratorium on genetically modified organisms, a drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, strict regulation of industrial fishing and the use of pesticides as chemical substances in agro-industrial production, a much greater development of public transit, the gradual replacement of trucks by trains.

These urgent eco-social demands can lead to a process of radicalization, provided that they are not adapted to the requirements of “competitiveness.” According to the logic of what Marxists call a “transitional program,” each small victory, each partial advance immediately leads to a greater demand, to a more radical objective. These struggles around concrete questions are important, not only because partial victories are useful in themselves, but also because they contribute to ecological and socialist awareness. Moreover, these victories promote activity and self-organization from below: these are two necessary and decisive pre-conditions for achieving a radical, that is to say revolutionary, transformation of the world.

There will be no radical transformation as long as the forces engaged in a radical, socialist and ecological program are not hegemonic, in the sense understood by Antonio Gramsci. In a sense, time is our ally, because we are working for the only change capable of solving environmental problems, which are only getting worse with threats — such as climate change — which are more and more close. On the other hand, time is running out, and in a few years — no one can say how much — the damage could be irreversible. There is no reason for optimism: the power of the current elites at the head of the system is immense, and the forces of radical opposition are still modest. However, they are the only hope we have to put a brake on the “destructive progress” of capitalism.

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P.S.

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2020/04/the-role-of-planning-in-ecosocialist.html>

Footnotes

[1] Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (Random House, 2019), pp. 95, 98.

[2] Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money* (Verso, London, 1992), p. 209.

[3] Mandel, *ibid.*, p. 204.

[4] The German philosopher Hans Jonas (*Le principe responsabilité*, Éd. du Cerf, 1979) raised the possibility of a “benevolent tyranny” to save nature, and the Finnish ecofascist Pentti Linkola (*Voisiko elämä voittaa*, Helsinki, Tammi, 2004) advocated a dictatorship capable of preventing any economic growth.

[5] Mandel, *ibid.*, p. 206.