

# Climate Leninism and Revolutionary Transition

## ORGANIZATION AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM IN CATASTROPHIC TIMES

Monday 18 July 2022, by [DEAN Jodi](#), [HERON Kai](#) (Date first published: 26 June 2022).

**Transition is the problem of our times. Energy transitions, technological transitions, green transitions, political transitions, just transitions... revolution. As COVID-19 variants kill millions, as habitats and species flicker out of existence, as homes burn or are swept away, as crops fail, and as tens of thousands of refugees drown in the English Channel or die of exposure in the deserts of Mexico, everyone knows things cannot carry on like this. Whatever our political persuasion, the question of transition is inescapable.**

### Contents

- [A LABORATORY OF TRANSITION](#)
- [THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION](#)
- [ONE, TWO, MANY DISAVOWALS \(...\)](#)
- [LEAPS AND RUPTURES](#)
- [INTERNATIONAL COALITION OF \(...\)](#)

Communism, Marx and Engels famously wrote, is “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” [1] As this movement, communism means transition. It is the abolition of the wage-relation, the value-form, private property, the state, and racialized and gendered regimes of system-sustaining violence. These things do not disappear overnight. “Between capitalist and communist society,” Marx writes elsewhere, “there lies a period of revolutionary transformation of one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” [2]

Transition *is* revolution. Transition’s push and pull, retreats and advances, are at the core of Marxist and non-Marxist revolutionary traditions. Despite this, today’s movements and theorists seldom give it much attention. Transition is a black box that lies between the present and our idealized visions of the future, whether that’s a radical Green New Deal, communism, or a degrowth future. At one extreme, some have rejected the question of transition entirely, imagining communism’s immediate implementation through ‘communizing measures.’ [3] At the other, transition is prorogued in favor of the apparently more urgent task of fighting for survival within capitalism.

As inspiring as the anti-capitalist Left’s visions of the future are, as much as we might want to collapse the problem of transition into immediate measures, and as understandable as it is to prioritize the immediacy of survival, all three evade the problem of transition. They deny its duration or disavow the fact that transition *is* communism in the making. How we depart from capitalism shapes our destination. And we *must* depart from capitalism.

## **A LABORATORY OF TRANSITION**

Like the twenty-five COPs preceding it, COP26 was meant to be the place where world leaders would find agreeable policy solutions to ecological catastrophe. On this score, the summit failed. In another sense, though, COP26 was a success. It showed how capitalist thought is far ahead of the Left when it comes to thinking about transition. A dialectical approach to COP26, one that pays attention to its *form* while stripping away its capitalist *content*, helps us approach the problem of revolutionary transition today.

Rather than being oriented toward a just transition, COP26 perpetuated imperialist and fossil capitalist interests. First, the Glasgow agreement emphasized “phasing down” coal when it should have included the fossil fuel trio of coal, oil, and gas. Coal remains essential to China and India’s economies as they recover from centuries of colonial subjugation, but not to the US, the world’s leading producer of oil and gas. The geopolitical and energy transition COP imagines benefits the imperialist powers, not most of the planet. Oil and gas producers and states beholden to fossil capital will “offset” their emissions through “nature-based solutions,” while so-called renewables enter the mix without replacing fossil fuels in time to avert the disaster of warming. [4]

Second, the US, EU, UK, and Australia removed the loss and damages facility from the final text of the Glasgow agreement. Submitted by all 138 developing countries, this facility is the financial support the richest countries owe the poorest. A similar loss and damages facility demanded by island nations was likewise removed from the final agreement by “developed” countries fearful that such clauses could lead to legal liability for past emissions and open the door to calls for reparations.

On halting global heating, on keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and on matters of global justice, COP26 was a complete failure. Yet elements of COP26’s proceedings point beyond their capitalist content towards a communist horizon: they express a theory of green transition at the relevant scale. COP26’s recognition that a large-scale project of landscape and seascape restoration and a move towards ecologically benign farming practices are required to sustain life on earth is progress.

For example, “nature-based solutions” to the climate crisis featured heavily at the summit. [5] Forty-five governments agreed to increase efforts to protect non-human nature and to move towards sustainable farming practices. In total, “over £4 billion in new public sector investment was pledged for agricultural innovation, including climate-resilient crops and regenerative solutions to improve soil health” with the aim of making such practices affordable for “hundreds of millions of farmers.” [6] Restored ecosystems and regenerative farming can increase biodiversity, repair deteriorated soils, increase soil water retention, reduce floods, reduce off-farm inputs, increase yields, improve climatic resilience, and empower farmers and agricultural communities. But of course, within the COP26 framework “sustainable farming” and “climate-resilient crops” can also mean patented genetically modified crops and off-farm inputs that disempower farmers by drawing them into systems of vertically integrated agriculture that accumulate rents or capture value for global agribusinesses. Worse still, as Indigenous and pastoralist leaders have emphasized, “nature-based solutions” could empower conservation practices that forcefully displace Indigenous and pastoralist communities from their land in the name of protecting a Eurocentric idea of “Nature” as pristine and ontologically independent of us.

The elements necessary for a transition to a post-capitalist, communist, future are there, even in the imperialist COP26. Since the earth’s temperature is already over a centigrade above pre-industrial levels and planned cuts are insufficient to reduce carbon emissions to the needed levels, [7] the only appropriate response is the nationalization, regulation, and prohibition of fossil fuels within a global framework wherein the imperialist countries accept responsibility for climate change and provide all the necessary financial support poor countries require. This is obvious and not particularly

complicated if one is not fettered by laws and suppositions regarding private property.

---

How we depart from capitalism shapes our destination. And we must depart from capitalism.

---

Imperialism is setting in place a future that increases the debt and dependence of colonized and formerly colonized peoples, heightening global misery and exploitation. The governments of fossil capital aren't committed to nature-based solutions that necessitate respect for Indigenous sovereignty. The goals of the imperialists are money and power, capital and control. The climate movement can no longer proceed as if our goal is persuading such governments to act.

Revolution is thus a practical and measured response to the unfolding climate catastrophe. Given the decades of capitalist failure to transform production while there was still time to keep temperatures within a degree of pre-industrial levels, revolution has gone from being a possible response to the world's ramifying crises to the most likely response. Revolutionary social upheaval will result from the mass migration of people fleeing floods, fires, and droughts, rioting for food, shelter, and energy, and seizing what is rightfully theirs. It will result from armed, indignant, and racist reactionaries fed up with government "overreach" and willing to take power into their own hands in the name of self-defense. The question is the direction revolutions will take: toward the abolition of eco-apartheid and the establishment of equitable and livable societies or toward the entrenchment of authoritarianism, fascism, and neofeudalism. That this is the question makes political transition the primary issue confronting us on the Left.

## **THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION**

A decade ago in *Tropic of Chaos*, Christian Parenti highlighted the fact that the climate crisis is a political crisis. While others were — and still are — presenting climate change in moral and ontological terms, Parenti recognized the imperative of generating the political will to take on and defeat the capitalist system driving global heating. [8] This recognition enabled Parenti to name the underlying contradiction. We need a powerful Left capable of using state power to confront and redress the grossly and globally unequal impacts of climate change, but we don't have time to build one.

The very structural problems that our political systems pose to addressing climate change present barriers to building a strong left counterpower. The fossil fuel sector's deep pockets hold lots of politicians. Few elected officials are confident that their constituents' stated concern with the unfolding environmental catastrophe reflects support for sacrifice or change, especially in the wake of decades of imposed austerity and the upward redistribution of wealth. For most political campaigns, climate change is not a winning issue. It's no wonder, then, that the only approach to transition tolerated by the US political establishment is the one most congenial to fossil capitalism and the US's own geopolitical self-interest; like the elites of other countries in the capitalist core, they plan to defend themselves from the worst of global heating while strengthening their borders

against the inevitable wave of climate refugees. This is a world of eco-apartheid: an imperialist regime of capital accumulation predicated on the exploitation of non-human nature and racialized peoples in sacrifice zones stretching from peripheries to centers.

Given the barriers presented by electoral politics, mass demonstrations and civil disobedience seem a promising avenue of change. As momentarily satisfying as these activities can be, they fail to dwell in the problem that makes them available as alternatives: the failure of capitalist democracies. Mass demonstrations are effective when they can influence political decision-making. But this presupposes the presence of deciders willing to make hard, potentially unpopular choices, which returns us to the general political impasse. What is the use of calls for change if no one who can make change hears them?

Given this political impasse, many climate mobilizations target market players, whether consumers, banks, non-profit institutions, or corporations. The aim of targeting drivers of gas-guzzling SUVs, for instance, is to generate lifestyle changes. This, and other consumer-oriented actions have laudable goals. [9] Yet personal consumption expenditures in the US have steadily increased since the 1970s (notwithstanding the steep decline and rapid recovery in 2020 due to the pandemic). Absent changes in production and policy, efforts focused on voluntary changes to consumption will remain inadequate.

Divestment has emerged as a movement strategy: activists pressure universities and museums to sell off their investments in oil and gas companies. The movement scored a visible victory in September 2021 when Harvard University announced it would eliminate indirect investments in the fossil fuel sector, having already eliminated direct investments. However, critics of divestment as a strategy point out its lack of real-world impact. Not only does shaming institutions into divestment fail to prevent fossil fuel companies from raising capital, but as a strategy it presumes a social body united around shared values, as if there were not people energized by the prospect of more oil and more drilling. For all the school children skipping school on Fridays, there are just as many isolationists concerned about energy independence and drivers who associate engines with freedom. When division goes all the way down, the supposition of shared values doesn't hold — in fact, the absence of these shared values is precisely the problem that deadlocks capitalist democracies and makes revolution likely as well as necessary. Shameless politicians can't be shamed because they are not isolated and alone; they have constituencies concerned neither with capitalist exploitation and inequality nor with climate change.

In 2011, Parenti faced the political problem climate change poses to capitalist democracies head on:

"The fact of the matter is time has run out on the climate issue. Either capitalism solves the crisis, or it destroys civilization. Capitalism begins to deal with the crisis now, or we face civilizational collapse beginning this century. We cannot wait for a socialist, or a communist, or anarchist, or deep-ecology, neoprimitive revolution; nor for a nostalgia-based *localista* conversion back to the mythical small-town economy of preindustrial America as some advance. [10]"

We were out of time a decade ago. But Parenti was too optimistic even then. Even as his analysis details the ways imperialism heightens the deadly impact of climate change across the array of countries eviscerated by colonialism and militarism, Parenti ultimately thinks that the capitalism we're stuck with can help solve some problems, especially if it is accompanied by an appreciation of the need for state action and technological advances in carbon sequestration. [11] Parenti implies an either/or between capitalism and civilizational collapse, as if capitalism itself were not a destroyer of

cultures and communities, as if its continuation were not the driver of collapse. He's right that time has run out. He's right in his broader argument regarding the need for the state. And he's right that there are elements of the present system that can and must be deployed in a green communist transition. Where Parenti falls short is in abandoning the project of a socialist seizure of the state and reconstruction of society.

---

Absent changes in production and policy, efforts focused on voluntary changes to consumption will remain inadequate.

---

It's a fantasy to think that capitalism can manage a transition from fossil fuels to so-called "renewables" in a way that will not spell death and catastrophe for many millions of human and non-human lives. The Global Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ) announced at COP26 pledged to make up to \$130 trillion available for funding the transition away from fossil fuels. [12] Whitney Webb's analysis draws out the imperialist predation underlying the initiative. Comprising the world's most powerful banks, GFANZ is creating "an international financial architecture" that will invest massive amounts of capital into specific country projects. Multilateral development banks (MDBs) such as the World Bank will play a critical role in directing these investments. Developing nations will be trapped in debt, their debt used to force them "to deregulate markets (specifically financial markets), privatize state assets and implement unpopular austerity policies." [13] Climate change is the new justification for imposing policies on developing countries, policies that benefit capital while dismantling public sectors and impoverishing populations. The capitalist response to climate change is an intensified predatory green imperialism. It's capitalism as civilizational collapse.

The fossil fuel industry and the world's largest producers of oil and gas will resist any real cuts to production with everything they have. International agreements and policy changes have so far done little to shift the balance of power. In the days immediately following COP26, BP Chief Executive Bernard Looney appeared unphased by agreements to reach net zero. "It may not be popular to say that oil and gas is going to be in the energy system for decades to come but that is the reality," he told CNBC. [14] Unless there is a revolution, the next couple of decades will be defined by a struggle between competing capitals — fossil capital on the one side, "green" capital on the other, with finance capital taking its cut from both — vying for a greater share of the world's ever increasing and unsustainable use of energy. The EIA predicts global energy consumption will increase by 50 percent by 2050, [15] something that degrowth scholarship shows us we can ill afford, even if a larger share comes from so-called renewables. [16]

Nonetheless, on one point at least we agree with the green capitalists, tech entrepreneurs, and imperialist world leaders who dream of a frictionless transition to renewable energy systems, high-yield vertical farms, lab-meats, and the decoupling of "growth" (capital accumulation) from material throughput: a transition of some kind is unavoidable. It cannot be said enough. Transition has become *the* question of our times, both for capitalism — as compounding ecological crises start to eat away at the fiction of capital's compatibility with human and non-human flourishing — and for radical movements and revolutionaries.

## ONE, TWO, MANY DISAVOWALS OF TRANSITION

The problem of transition makes itself felt through a proliferation of post-capitalist imaginaries. Collectively we have imagined Green New Deals, Degrowth futures, a Red Deal, a Small Farm Future, Fully Automated Luxury Communism, Half-Earth Socialism, decolonized feminist horizons, agroecological matrices, and more. Yet each of these jumps over, eschews, or delays the problem of transition. How do we get from *here*, from a world on fire, to *there*, to a world slowly but surely regenerating from centuries of violence, plunder and exploitation? What is our strategy? What are our immediate tactics? This is a problem that can't be avoided.

In *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, Andreas Malm suggests that neither anarchist horizontalism nor social democracy is capable of decarbonizing society fast enough to avoid the dire consequences of ecological collapse. Rehearsing a familiar Marxist critique of anarchism, Malm finds the tradition to be too decentralized, too opposed to programs, discipline, and the state's potential as an instrument of revolutionary transition. Social democracy is equally ill-suited to the crisis because of its inability to act rapidly and decisively. "Social democracy," Malm writes, "works on the assumption that time is on our side. There must be plenty of it." The problem — and here Malm is correct — is that time is not on our side. Even supposing that another Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn were to appear in the next election cycle, and even supposing that they were elected by a landslide, a social democratic system with a progressive at its helm would need to go beyond itself to respond to the ecological crisis in time. It would need to implement extraordinary measures. It would need to act with the kind of haste that has not been seen in social democracies outside of war conditions.

If neither anarchism nor social democracy are up to the task, then what are we left with? Malm's answer intends to provoke: eco-Leninism and war communism. Drawing inspiration from revolutionary Russia's mass mobilization between 1918 and 1921, Malm proposes a project of swift nationalization, dissolution of class and privilege, and redistribution of land and wealth. All this, Malm says, the Bolsheviks and Russia's peasants and workers achieved under the most inhospitable circumstances in the aftermath of World War I, without access to essential resources and during an imperialist anti-revolutionary invasion. Might something similar be possible in today's inhospitable circumstances and against our own forces of reaction? Can we not imagine a war communist response to ecological collapse? War communism for Malm functions as a cognitive map, a way for today's anti-capitalist movements to orient themselves in a world of inevitable upheaval, revolution, and counter-revolution.

From our perspective, Malm's proposal evades the problem of revolutionary transition. War communism is a plan for what comes *after* a revolutionary movement has taken power or *after* social movements have implausibly persuaded capitalist states to act via a coordinated campaign of mass civil disobedience and sabotage (as Malm's argument in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* suggests). What we need is a way to build our political forces and capacities in the present, to support ourselves through the coming catastrophes, and to win a communist future. War communism is supposed to hold up a mirror to our predicament and in so doing show the distance we must travel. But we need more than mirrors; we need a politics that works from the material conditions of struggle that confront us, not one that takes a distance from them. We need a politics of revolutionary transition.

Out of the Woods Collective's (OWC) essay "Disaster Communism" turns the tasks of everyday survival into the means for building this politics. [17] OWC dwells in the messy reality of ecological collapse. The Collective draws inspiration from Rebecca Solnit's study of "disaster communities," temporary relations of mutual aid and solidarity that arise in the wake of socio-natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina or COVID-19. Solnit's studies show that in the immediate aftermath of disasters people are more likely to set aside differences and self-interest than they are to descend



into Mad Max scenarios. Community kitchens, gifting, solidarity funds, and the borrowing of essential items to survive and rebuild create a deeper sense of collectivity and sociality.

But disaster communities are fleeting things. The capitalist state, oriented toward the protection of private property, the wage form, and raced and gendered hierarchy, invariably steps in to reimpose its order, attacking self-organization and solidarity. The collective's question therefore becomes that of how to "dismantle social orders that make disasters so disastrous, while at the same time making the extraordinary behavior they elicit ordinary." [18] How do we step beyond ephemeral disaster communities to realize an enduring "disaster communism?" The collective does not suggest that more disasters are needed to incite disaster communism; rather, OWC's wager is that disaster communities might become disasters for capitalism. What's needed, they write, is a "revolutionary process of developing our collective capacity to endure and flourish that emerges from these struggles. Disaster communism is a movement within, against, and beyond ongoing capitalist disaster." [19]

OWC's insistence on the question of how to open a space beyond capitalism within capitalism is essential. It is the question labor organizers present whenever workers are poised to strike: how can we create solidarity out of competition when survival is at stake? At the same time, the collective's practical proposals remain impressionistic. They call for "seizing the means of social reproduction," mutual aid, and extending and sustaining moments of collectivity and communal abundance. "The communism of disaster communism", they write, "is a transgressive and transformative mobilization." [20] But the questions of *who* does the mobilizing, with what forms of *organization*, and *how* are not addressed.

Some might think it unfair to expect answers to such questions. The self-organization of the working classes will answer them in and through struggle. Yet this familiar genuflection to the fact that revolution produces its own forms of struggle puts revolution at a distance from *us*, as if we were observers rather than participants in the struggles of our time. It suggests that it is somehow not up to *us* to act, to take sides, to take risks, to name movements, subjects, and organizational forms that might realize revolutionary transition today. This is a distance we cannot afford in a time of generalized socio-ecological catastrophe.

In recent years base-building has become another popular response to these questions. [21] Base-building correctly sees the limitations of jumping over the problem of transition. Its proponents argue that rather than projecting our imaginaries into far-flung futures, we should challenge capital "through industrial or tenants' unions, mutual aid associations and cooperatives to build a 'dual power' against the capitalist state, creating a workers' society of mass organizations that are independent of any capitalist political party." [22] The lacunae in Malm and OWC's thinking about transition disappears. Who does the mobilizing? "A small, committed group of people with a shared idea of socialism and base building must be willing to come together and dedicate themselves to the work of socialist base building." [23] What mobilization is required? "Organizing the unorganized" via mutual aid, tenants unions, canvassing, food programs, and more. [24]

---

Unless there is a revolution, the next couple of decades will be defined by a struggle between competing capitals — fossil capital on the one side, "green" capital on the other, with finance capital taking its cut from both — vying for a greater share of the world's ever increasing and unsustainable use of energy.

---

However, as important as this work is, base-builders are decidedly fuzzy on the question of how meeting the immediate material needs of workers and communities within capitalism transitions into revolutionary struggle. Given the devastation wrought by thirty years of neoliberal austerity, how does the effort to address people's real problems transition into a politics that recognizes capitalism as the underlying cause?

Base-builders are aware of this. Writing in *Regeneration*, Teresa Kalisz of the now defunct Marxist Center notes that base-building as a tactic is not intrinsically revolutionary; it is a strategic task "all healthy political organizations must take on, whether they are communist, socialist, or anarchist; even liberal groups often engage in base building." [24] The problem is that "by not going beyond these tactics and connecting them to a political vision," the Marxist left "runs the very real risk of presenting ourselves and engaging our organizing in an apolitical way." Transition is postponed, brushed aside amidst the never-ending demands of ceaseless everyday needs. "Solidarity, not Charity!" goes the rallying call of base-builders, but in practice the line between solidarity and charity is not always easy to define and so what base-building gains over Malm and OWC on the one hand, it loses on the other. It recognizes the limits of jumping over the problem of transition, only to wrestle with transition's deferral from the opposite direction.

## **LEAPS AND RUPTURES**

The unavoidable challenge of transition, of getting from where we are to where we need to be, is a *political* challenge. As Christian Zeller has argued, the "we" must be produced, generated, built. [25] It has to endure beyond the initial weeks and months of a disaster and extend beyond neighborhoods, personal relationships, and those members of a community engaging in mutual aid (we should observe here how the language of community obscures divisions, especially those of class - landlords and owners don't need to share). The "we" necessary for an anti-imperialist approach to climate change, for a just, a communist, transition, has to be conscious of itself as a "we."

Further, this consciousness must be linked to a shared understanding of where we are and where we need to be, and a recognition that we can only get where we need to be through organized, collective action. This "we" must be legible to itself and others as a practical unity. Finally, in addition to these requirements of endurance, scale, and collective consciousness, this "we" must be willing and able to act collectively, as a whole, a challenge that compels the production of the we it presupposes. We come together because that's the only way we can win. And we must win - the flourishing of people and the planet depends on our meeting the challenge of a just transition.

Global climate politics faces problems of scale and coordination. The dimension of scale is easy to see: we need forms of struggle that are more than assemblies of locals and experimental communities of resistance. We need organizational approaches that operate at national and international scales, that can adopt national and international perspectives and strategies.

How do we make decisions about strategies, tactics, and priorities, at a national and international scale? What assumptions guide our deliberations at these larger scales? This is where shared values and common principles matter enormously. This is where the question of our politics comes in: what is the line that we hold in common, the principles to which we are committed to fight? We all know that as the climate catastrophe intensifies, so will ethno-nationalisms. We need now to establish an irrevocable anti-imperialist international commitment that prioritizes the regions and peoples most immediately and heavily impacted by climate change. This of course includes welcoming climate



refugees and providing all necessary material and financial support for a just tradition.

The challenge of transition thus pushes us toward that form of political organization that endures, scales, supports a collective consciousness, and enables coordinated action. Lenin's theory and practice point to such a form – the party. The party form is a specific response to a specific challenge, namely, the imperative of preparing for a situation that can never be fully predicted nor determined. The Left was unprepared for the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008. It was unprepared for its successes in 2011 and thus unable to defend and extend them. It was unprepared for the COVID pandemic, a planetary ecological crisis from which no leftist power had the capacity to build. We no longer have the luxury of spontaneity. If climate change is not to intensify oppression and accelerate extinction, we have to build and join organizations adequate to the challenge of transitional thinking and acting.

The imperative of the party form arises from an analysis of our conjuncture: how can we endure, scale, and strategize? How can we win? We cannot expect mass demonstrations to exert pressure sufficient to get governments to enact the changes necessary for a just transition. Demonstrations may push governments to do something, but that something will protect the property and profits of the ruling classes and promote the interests of the imperialist powers. Given the inevitability of fires, floods, droughts, famines, and mass migration, we have to expect that governments will change. There will be insurrections. Revolution is on the table. We have to build the organizational power capable of using these opportunities to seize the state and steer the restructuring of energy, production, and society. If nothing else, Malm and the Zetkin Collective are correct when they emphasize that the coming period will be one of ever-intensifying polarization and confrontation. [26] The anti-climate politics of the far right should shatter any remaining illusion that fossil fuels can be relinquished through some kind of smooth, reasoned transition. The fact of this conflict means we must prepare for a chaotic, uncertain, and revolutionary transition.

At an Extinction Rebellion demonstration in November 2021, Canadian environmentalist and broadcaster David Suzuki announced, “there are going to be pipelines blown up if our leaders don't pay attention to what's going on.” [27] He's right; there will. But this fact doesn't name a politics; it doesn't indicate a political line. What follows from these acts other than the immediate escalation of state violence and repression? Will citizens, observers, immediately reject the state's use of force or will they be swayed by decades of anti-terrorist propaganda? Will some people respond by imitating the tactic and spreading discontent? Will others then drag out their personal arsenal of assault rifles in the name of self-defense?

Climate Leninism enjoins us to prepare politically for these events, to conceive them as tactics undertaken by a party following an analysis of the correlation of forces. The perspective of revolution must be adopted as the standpoint for assessing means and ends, strategies and tactics, an assessment conducted by an organization with the capacity to execute it. We must assume the actuality of revolution and plan for its eventuality. Again, we cannot know when and where it will set off and how it will unfold. Nevertheless, like the intelligence agencies and think tanks of the imperialist powers, we, too, have to count on the fact that climate change will lead to extraordinary social upheavals. It already has, as over a decade of refugee crises and resource wars demonstrate.

We thus use Climate Leninism as the name for the politics needed at this conjuncture of imperialism and climate emergency. The revolutionary party is its basic premise. Here we anticipate a familiar objection: building a revolutionary party – especially in the context of widespread anti-communism – will take too long (as any number of disappointed partisans will tell you).

On the one hand, this is true. Party-building can be slow work, the recruiting of ones and twos when millions are needed. On the other hand, change happens in fits and starts. History moves, as Daniel

Bensaid says, following Lenin, through leaps and ruptures. [28] No one could have predicted before the summer of 2019 that the US would experience its largest ever mass protests (over 35 million people) in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

---

The challenge of transition thus pushes us toward that form of political organization that endures, scales, supports a collective consciousness, and enables coordinated action. Lenin's theory and practice point to such a form – the party

---

When a strong party base is established and a period of political upheaval is underway, growth can be rapid and dramatic. The Bolsheviks grew ten times in size between February and September of 1917 (from 20,000 to 200,000 members). Once we recognize the nonlinearity of political time, we can accept the need to use ebbs in the movement, political downtime, to build and prepare, to acquire the skills and make the connections that will allow us to seize opportunities when they arise. This recognition lets us formulate Climate Leninism more precisely as preparedness plus nonlinearity within the given material conditions, in other words, the organization of a collectivity with the capacity to respond to the climate emergency.

How then do we connect party-building with the climate catastrophe, or, in light of our discussion above, how do we combine the best insights of Malm, the Out of the Woods Collective, and the base-builders? Differently put, how does the work of party-building also do the work of climate struggle or how do we turn movement practices into progress on two fronts, party building and climate militancy?

Formulating the questions directs us to the terrains on which answers will arise. The array of tactics familiar to movement actors – blockades, occupations, marches, rallies – becomes a means for recruiting party cadres, building coherent alliances, and weaving a red thread through the movements. Likewise experiments in farming, urban gardening, and similar such survival oriented micro-initiatives can be expanded into the repertoire of party practices, treated as opportunities for building skills and camaraderie. In each instance, previously separate activities – a blockade here, a mutual aid arrangement there – become consciously integrated into a larger theory and plan for building the power necessary to effect a just transition.

Political, economic, energy, and social transition require centralized planning. Capitalists acknowledge this fact. An editorial in the *Financial Times*, for instance, called for a central planning body to formulate plans for transition in energy, transport, buildings, industry and agriculture because “the price mechanism struggles with coordinating rapid transformation at this scale.” [29] A just transition, one that is anti-imperialist and oriented toward the struggles of the oppressed, demands even more coordination and planning: we have a capitalist enemy to defeat and its hegemony to unravel.

For this reason, organized and interconnected revolutionary parties are indispensable. Such parties facilitate training and coordination; we learn from one another. This work of coordination is the

same work necessary for responding to the climate crisis. Building political organizations to fight for a just transition builds the capacities, the human and organizational infrastructures, we need for carrying it out. Centralizing climate, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and other struggles into a party turns disciplined analysis and preparation into the school for planning necessary for implementing the measures just transition requires. In sum, the party is a form for building long-term alliances and training cadre, requirements for any politics of climate change that recognizes the actuality of revolution.

Base-building and communities of survival fail to scale because their focus is local; they work hard to solve local problems. A party – and an International – see from larger perspectives: the national, regional, and global. These larger perspectives are the ones the climate crisis forces on us. And they are vitally necessary for waging a political struggle that prepares us for the challenges ahead.

## **INTERNATIONAL COALITION OF THE OPPRESSED**

The call for a revolutionary party may seem like the all-too-familiar answer to the impasses of capitalist democracy. But Climate Leninism cannot mechanically apply Lenin's political prescriptions. Climate Leninism must mean something more expansive. It must be situated within and draw from the entire tradition of revolutionary thought and struggle that has positioned itself as a continuation of the Russian Revolution. This includes anti-colonial revolutionaries who, in Fanon's words, found that they must "stretch" Lenin and the lessons of the revolution, reshaping them for their own times and context: intellectuals and organizers like Walter Rodney, Amílcar Cabral, Samir Amin, Jose Carlos Mariategui, Antonio Gramsci, A.M Babu, Harry Haywood, Sam Moyo, and Rossana Rossanda. It includes struggles in China, Vietnam, Guinea Bissau, Angola, the island of Ireland, Burkina Faso, Cuba and more. What unites these thinkers and movements across their differences is a knowledge of the necessity of revolution, the seizure of the state, and the role of peasants, workers, women, and national minorities. The Russian Revolution itself would have been impossible without the development of just such a "coalition of the oppressed," as Lenin put it.

These coalitions cannot be assumed. They must be *composed* in and through shared struggles, acts of solidarity, and party-building. Climate Leninism requires building coalitions between Indigenous peoples, workers in the Global North, smallholder farmers and pastoralists, women, racialized communities, and other oppressed and exploited groups on issues of ecological, economic, and political significance.

Climate Leninism reminds us that we cannot — as many Marxists do — fetishize the industrialized, unionized, worker of the Global North or pursue national green transition programs without considering their impact on the Global South's lands and labor. A recent report found that Indigenous resistance has staved off 25 percent of the US and Canada's projected annual emissions, which is the equivalent of approximately four hundred new coal fired power plants. It's estimated that Indigenous peoples, comprising roughly 5 percent of the world's population, defend 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. The Peruvian Leninist Jose Carlos Mariategui well understood the struggles of Indigenous peoples and their importance to revolution. Indigenous peoples, he argued, could not redress their oppression and the theft of their lands through legislative reform or moral appeal. Only the wholesale socialization of land and food systems, guided by Indigenous peoples' lived "practical socialism", would suffice. [\[30\]](#)

Likewise, smallholder farmers and pastoralists in the Global South produce around a third of the world's food, with much lower fossil fuel inputs and carbon emissions than industrialized agriculture, and despite decades of economic interventions aimed at eroding their ways of life, practical ecological knowledge, and place on the land. Thomas Sankara recognized the revolutionary role of smallholder farmers. Immediately after coming to power, Sankara proclaimed the creation of

the National Council of the Revolution and called on peasants and workers to form Popular Committees. The first of these emerged in poor neighborhoods in Burkina Faso's capital before spreading to other towns and rural neighborhoods. A relation of accountability and shared struggle was established between the party and local democratic organizations. A dialectic of transition was formed. In his speech *Imperialism is the Arsonist of our Fires and Savannas*, Sankara shows how anti-imperialist struggle and ecological struggle are one and the same. In just over a month, Sankara's government delivered basic courses in economic and environmental management to more than 35,000 peasants. Sankara's Burkina Faso also planted millions of trees to push back the threat of desertification, presided over a successful vaccination and literary campaign, and achieved huge increases in agrarian productivity and irrigation. All this was possible because the party and the people worked at scale to realize a revolutionary transition.

Climate Leninism today should draw inspiration from these struggles. It should listen to the signatories of the Cochabamba People's agreement and stand in solidarity with ongoing calls for economic and food sovereignty from peasant movements like La Via Campesina and Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement as well as calls for national self-determination and Land Back from Indigenous and colonized peoples the world over. Such struggles and their demands to delink from capital's global divisions of labor must be the point of departure for a radical anti-capitalist climate politics in the Global North and South. Following thinkers such as Max Ajl and Keston Perry, Climate Leninism should put climate reparations and technology transfers at the center of its internationalism.

In a recent Agrarian South Network research bulletin, Paris Yeros proposed the world's anti-capitalist movements ought to fight towards a new Bandung conference. This would be "an international solidarity front of peasants, workers and peoples" that set its sights on "reinitiating and reinforcing a world socialist transition in the first half of the twenty-first century." The purpose would be to "establish a framework of systematic dialogue among movements and parties and provide ideological, political, and logistical support to struggles as they evolve." [31] Ambitiously, Yeros calls for an international meeting of representatives of existing socialist parties, national liberation movements, social movements of peasants, workers, and Indigenous and other traditional peoples in 2025, "timed to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung."

This is an urgent call. It contains a Climate Leninist theory of revolutionary transition: party-building, anti-imperialism, and a global coalition of the oppressed. A COP26 for anti-imperialists. The same form — planetary transitions, planetary aspirations — with a different, revolutionary, content.

**Kai Heron and Jodi Dean**

---

**P.S.**

• Spectre. June 26, 2022:  
<https://spectrejournal.com/climate-leninism-and-revolutionary-transition/>

• Kai Heron is a Lecturer in Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. He writes and researches on the subjects of contemporary political theory, land and environmental politics, and political economy.

Jodi Dean is a Professor of Political Science at Hobart William Smith Colleges, New York. She is the author of many books including *Crowds and Party* (2016) and *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (2019).

---

## Footnotes

- [1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, originally published 1932.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>
- [2] Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," originally published 1890-91,  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch04.htm>
- [3] <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/1/en/endnotes-bring-out-your-dead>
- [4] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-59220687>
- [5] <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop26-day-7-sticking-points-and-nature-based-solutions>
- [6] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-leads-45-governments-in-new-pledges-to-protect-nature>
- [7] <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/world-track-24c-global-warming-after-latest-pledges-analysts-2021-11-09/>
- [8] Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos*, Bold Type Books, 2012, 226.
- [9] "COP26: Activists deflate tyres on 'luxury' cars in Glasgow," BBCNews, 12 November 2021,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-59254298>
- [10] Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos*, 241.
- [11] Parenti, C, *A Left Defence of Carbon Dioxide Removal: The State Must be Forced to Deploy Civilization-Saving Technology*, Has It Come to This? Editors: J.P Sapinski, Holly Jean Buck, Andreas Malm, pp. 130-143.
- [12] "COP26: 'Not blah blah blah', UN Special Envoy Carney presents watershed private sector commitment for climate finance," U.N. News, 3 November 2021,  
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1104812>.
- [13] Whitney Webb, "UN-backed banker alliance announces 'green' plan to transform the global financial system," MROnline, 12 November 2021,  
<https://mronline.org/2021/11/12/un-backed-banker-alliance-announces-green-plan-to-transform-the-global-financial-system/>
- [14] Holly Ellyatt, "Oil and gas will be in the global energy system 'for decades,' BP chief says," CNBC, 15 November 2021,  
<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/15/bp-committed-to-tackling-climate-change-ceo-says.html>.
- [15] <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41433>.

- [16] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378020307512>.
- [17] Out of the Woods Collective. 'The Uses of Disaster'. Commune, 22 October 2018. <https://communemag.com/the-uses-of-disaster/>.
- [18] *ibid.*
- [19] *ibid.*
- [20] *ibid.*
- [21] See Derek Wall, *Climate Strike: The Practical Politics of the Climate Crisis* (The Merlin Press, 2020).
- [22] <https://www.marxistcentre.org.uk/basebuilding>.
- [23] <https://theleftwind.org/2018/03/16/its-all-about-that-base-a-dossier-on-the-base-building-trend/>
- [24] <https://regenerationmag.org/everyday-ruptures-putting-basebuilding-on-a-revolutionary-path/>.
- [25] <https://spectrejournal.com/revolutionary-strategies-on-a-heated-earth/>.
- [26] Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*, Verso, 2021, p. xvii.
- [27] <https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?e=8dbc2f8aa5&u=7c733794100bcc7e083a163f0&id=9f7daf877f>
- [28] Bensaïd, Daniel. "'Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!'", in Budgen, ed. *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, Sic Vii: 07. Translated by Fernbach. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 148 - 163.
- [29] Max Krahe, "For Sustainable Finance to Work, We Will Need Central Planning, *Financial Times*, 11 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/54237547-4e83-471c-8dd1-8a8dcebc0382>.
- [30] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariateg/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay02.htm> and <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariateg/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay03.htm>.
- [31] <http://www.agrariansouth.org/2021/10/21/elements-of-a-new-bandung-by-paris-yeros/>, pp. 11-12.