

# “Green Socialism” and the Left

What is ‘Socialist’ about ‘Green Socialism’?

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*“Another grand, left-wing concept with an adjective... Shouldn’t we rather work on concrete social-ecological projects – on initiatives for conversion, a process of ‘energy transition,’ or free public transport?” Undoubtedly, many problems of the left have resulted from its tendency to create grand utopias and attempt to bring social reality in line with them. Transformation starts with concrete entry projects, but where does this road go to? What is the common ground, the common direction of manifold initiatives? Ultimately, we need an antidote to pragmatism – American activists call it a ‘vision.’*



What does this imply for green politics? One of the core tasks of left-wing politics is to constantly work on connecting the social and the ecological question. The left is credible on the social question – and there are promising attempts to become more convincing on ecology, even if the mainstream media does not seem to notice this much. There is the notion of ‘social-ecological transformation,’ which belonged to the agenda of the green parties in the 1980s. Today, it is used from the left as a paradigm for the ‘mosaic left’ in formation. But how can we make sure that it remains rooted in a counter-hegemonic project? How far is the profile of the socialist left different from that of Friends of the Earth? It is surely right to build bridges between diverging approaches to social change, but in the process, contradictions are often covered up, and a debate on contentious issues like property and the state is avoided. In this article, we are experimenting with the concept of ‘green socialism.’ We want to discuss whether it could fill the void of a left-wing, ecological, feminist imagination.

## Background

If we consider the present relations of forces, the ‘green’ question does not appear to be a contentious issue – ‘socialism’ is what is controversial. The idea of ‘eco-socialism’ failed because its intervention coincided with deep ruptures in global history, namely the collapse of state socialism and the rise of neoliberalism. Socialism was no longer en vogue; it was seen as an ossified and defeated project. The eco-socialist current of the left shrank into a friendly cult, which emphasized what ought to be but rarely intervened in concrete social-ecological struggles. Around the same time, green issues became fashionable, not least because of the [1992 global summit in Rio de Janeiro](#). There was a “passive revolution” (Gramsci) divorcing the ecological from the social question. The ecological question was absorbed into neoliberal strategies of managing globalization. This happened through the

institutionalization of environmental policy and global climate summits, as well as through the integration of green parties and NGOs into mainstream politics. From an ecological standpoint, the successes of the passive revolution were limited; there is an unbroken trend toward deepening ecological and social crises; the ecological crises have accrued considerable social costs and vice versa. Consequently, 'green socialism' has to be linked up with concrete struggles such as struggles over energy production and projects of conversion based on a 'just transition.'

In the midst of the great crisis of neoliberalism and the authoritarian imposition of austerity throughout Europe, the prospect of a transition to 'green capitalism' (Fücks/Steenboom 2007; for a critique see Candeias/Kuhn 2008) or a 'green economy' (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2012; for a critique see Brand 2012) raises the hopes of many people. The underlying political strategy focuses on channelling investment toward a process of 'energy transition' and kick-starting ecological modernization with the help of new technologies and an accumulation strategy that is supposed to create millions of jobs. The notion of a 'green economy' promotes growth and an increase in exports; it is not about limiting the use of resources. In contrast to older approaches, which were centred on 'sustainability,' it does not aim to overcome the contradiction between the economy and ecology. Rather, it advocates the commodification of nature and environmental protection, which means that the political management of the ecological crisis becomes a factor in, and a driver of, capitalist accumulation. In sum, the 'green economy' approach is about reproducing capitalist hegemony by taking on board ecological interests – it represents an elite consensus garnished with the vague hope that there will be a few new jobs.

Recently, the predominance of the politics of austerity in Europe has restrained the momentum behind the push for a green economy. And yet, there are debates whether the 'growth components' of the European Fiscal Compact should include incentives for, and investment in, ecological modernization. In this context, capitalist interests converge with those of social democracy and the trade unions (and this even applies to clearly left-wing appeals such as "[Founding Europe Anew!](#)," which emerged out of the German trade union movement).

'Green socialism' is about taking a stand against – not for a long time realized – 'green capitalism.' The concept is about linking up a range of interests and movements in the name of "revolutionary Realpolitik," ensuring that "their particular efforts, taken together, push beyond the framework of the existing order" (Rosa Luxemburg, [Marxist Theory and the Proletariat](#)). In the process, many of the old socialist themes – e.g., redistribution, power and property, planning and democracy – are updated and linked up with new issues. It is necessary to link 'green socialism' to real contradictions and conditions – to real social forces and movements that are tackling different issues, getting involved in different conflicts and developing concrete, experimental practices.

### The Example of Redistribution

Redistribution is a key aspect of any kind of left-wing politics. It does not figure at all in the present conceptions of a 'green economy' and only plays a subordinate role in the project of a 'Green New Deal' even in times of austerity. This suggests that the issue is not taken seriously. For the German Green Party, softening the demand for redistribution is an act of "being straight" with the population, they say. From the neoliberal point of view, the debts of the financial institutions bailed out by the state have to be serviced. Social Democrats and Greens tend to go along with this: they want to regain the "trust of the markets," which

is why most of their party organizations in Europe have agreed to the ratification of the European Fiscal Compact. The pact will not only bring a new wave of 'bottom-up' redistribution, but it will also exacerbate the economic crisis and drive entire countries into depression. Importantly, it will not lead to a permanent reduction in debt.

It is necessary to discuss the illegitimate debt weighing down on many European countries. This issue requires democratic consultation and decision-making and serious attempts to design a procedure for a *debt audit* (cf. Candeias 2011b). A comprehensive cancellation of debt, comparable to a currency reform, would be needed – not just for Greece. This should be combined with a *just tax policy* based on forcing the capital – and asset-owners to contribute more to financing the public sector, which would be an act of returning some of the social surplus product to the general public. This would put a stop to processes of "bottom-up" redistribution and open spaces for a politics based on social-ecological concerns. The people in Europe are prepared for a political intervention along these lines because they are currently exposed to the existential threat posed by debt. Numerous forces from civil society agree to it, for example the CDTM (the Greek campaign for a debt audit, cf. *LuXemburg* 2/2012) and left-wing parties like SYRIZA and Izquierda Unida. These organizations intervene in the current wave of European protests against the effects of the crisis and demand a debt audit, the taxation of assets, a financial transactions tax, a levy on banks etc.

## The Socialization of Investment

Over the medium-term, it is necessary to socialize the investment function, which is an old Keynesian demand. Who in society should determine the use of (physical and social) resources, and who should decide which types of work are socially necessary? The market – purportedly the most efficient mechanism for the allocation of investment – has embarrassed itself. The over-accumulation of capital is regularly producing financial bubbles, followed by the destruction of capital and jobs. At the same time, the number of sectors of social reproduction that are deprived of funding and neglected until they collapse is constantly increasing. Childcare, education, environmental protection, the general infrastructure and public services are all affected. The "green economy" focuses on commodification and the market. Yet the market takes too long to resolve problems, and the big corporations behind "fossil capitalism" want to get a foothold in the "green economy" at the same time as keeping their fixed capital.

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What is needed is financial regulation, the nationalization of "systemically relevant" banks, a network of public banks, and the introduction of participatory budgeting at all levels of society. The socialization of investment and participatory investment decisions are two of the preconditions for a left-wing and socialist project of structural transformation. ”

There will not be a smooth passage to a restructured economy: it is impossible to meet the challenge of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent and catapulting the entire economy from the 150-year old age of "fossils" into the "solar future" without ruptures and crises. If the transition is pursued with tenacity, it is unavoidable that some of the old branches of industry and their capital will come under attack, which in turn will trigger resistance. If the markets prove incapable of ensuring investment, this has to become, to a much stronger degree, a public project. What is needed is financial regulation, the

nationalization of “systemically relevant” banks, a network of public banks, and the introduction of participatory budgeting at all levels of society. The socialization of investment and participatory investment decisions are two of the preconditions for a left-wing and socialist project of *structural transformation*. Without them, the gains made through successful policies of redistribution can be reversed easily.

### Reclaiming the Public Sphere

It is necessary to transform the mode of production and living. This should not be done through the commodification and privatization of natural resources, but through the preservation of the universal and public character of the natural commons and other public goods, and through the expansion of collective public services that are cheap and eventually free. For example, free public transport networks should be expanded while subsidies for car-makers should be stopped. Green socialism focuses on the public sector; it is about “remunicipalizing” key parts of the infrastructure and guaranteeing democratic decision-making on issues concerning the transformation of the mode of production and consumption. Moreover, it is based on promoting collective forms of consumption rooted in the social infrastructure and universal, solidarity-based forms of social security. Demanding their expansion would also allow us to respond to the fixation of some left-wing trade unionists on wage increases and material consumption – and would do so without forcing us to get involved in debates on the need to rein in consumption. Besides, an expansion of the public sphere not based on commodification would also amount to markets and processes of privatization being pushed back.

In contrast, the idea of a “green economy” favours technological fixes based on private property, for example large-scale projects such as Desertec,[\[1\]](#) huge offshore wind parks, and monopolized, transcontinental super-grids for long-distance energy exports. Strong fractions of capital are already gathering behind the project. Their strategies undermine the potential for de-centralization inherent in the new technologies; they produce “false solutions” that create social-ecological conflict.

In light of this, the demands of social movements and local initiatives have started to converge with those of left-wing politicians operating at the local and the regional level. Both sides are fighting against attempts by big corporations to impose a process of “energy transition” from above; they are advocating de-centralized, local solutions, for example the remunicipalization of services of general interest and the establishment of energy cooperatives and bio-energetic villages. A variety of movements and groups are using the concept of “energy democracy” in order to create a shared perspective.

### Focussing on Economies of Reproduction

For a successful socio-ecological transformation, it is necessary to focus on reproductive needs; existing, growth-oriented capitalist economies should be transformed into “economies of reproduction,” which know both how to limit themselves and to produce new wealth (cf. Candeias 2011a, 96). Sectors that are captured by a broad conception of “reproduction work” or “care work” would be at the heart of this transformation. There would be an expansion of needs-oriented social services such as healthcare, elder care, childcare, education, research, nutrition, environmental protection and others. In these areas, everybody has been complaining about shortages for years; at the same time, they are the only sectors in the industrialized countries where employment is on the rise. They should remain under public control and should not be exposed to the market. This would be

a contribution to the “ecologization” of the existing mode of production (working with people usually does not lead to environmental destruction), and to addressing the crises of wage labour and unpaid reproduction work. A process of transformation along these lines could contribute to shape gender relations in an emancipatory fashion.

This includes redefining and redistributing what we understand by “socially necessary labour” (4in1-perspective by Frigga Haug). This could be achieved by reducing labour time and expanding publicly funded, collective work processes. Such interventions are emphatically not about increasing surplus value, but about reducing the consumption of energy and raw materials, as well as assessing work on the grounds of its contribution to human development and the overall wealth in social relations.

In this context, it is important to see that the poor’s experience of being ruled and exploited by others coincides with the desire for participation and solidarity of the left-libertarian sections of the middle class. There is potential for a convergence of the demands of social movements critical of growth, feminist organizations, and service-sector unions like the German ver.di. Besides, the reorientation toward reproductive needs entails an economic shift toward domestic markets and production. Global chains of production have been overstretched for a long time, and they are wasting resources. This assessment should not be taken as a reflection of “naïve anti-industrialism” (Urban). It is motivated by the need to envisage an *alternative production* (the term used in the debates on conversion in the 1980s). It would be wrong to assume that continuing the export-oriented strategy of German car makers by promoting electric cars contributes to the emergence of an alternative form of production. After all, the production of the batteries needed for electric cars consumes considerable amounts of energy and raw materials and pollutes the environment because it involves a number of highly toxic substances. Moreover, the switch to electric cars does not do anything about the enormous use of space and the soil sealing caused by the construction of roads. Rather than talking about electric cars, we should discuss how the conversion of car makers into green service providers can be achieved, and how they can be transformed into companies dedicated to facilitating public mobility on the grounds of regionally rooted conceptions of transport.

Against the backdrop of such discursive shifts, trade unions like German metal union IG Metall, which are entangled in the export-oriented strategies of German corporations and in forms of “crisis corporatism,” could start to develop independent strategies. As a result, they would not constantly find themselves at loggerheads with other sections of the “mosaic left” – or appear as victors in a crisis that badly hits sister organizations in other parts of Europe.

A new focus on reproduction could trigger a process of economic *de-globalization* and re-nationalization. This would contribute to the reduction of current account imbalances and alleviate the pressure on countries in the global south to become part of global chains of production and policies of extraction. They would no longer have to accept the global flows of raw materials and the imperial way of life in the global north. In other words, spaces for independent development would emerge. This would have to be complemented by the development of global planning in the area of raw material and resources, which would guarantee a just distribution of wealth, limit consumption and address reproductive needs. In sum, an economy of reproduction means that people’s needs and the economy in general develop in *qualitative* not in *quantitative* ways.



## Just Transitions

Transformation is not an easy path but produces a lot of social problems. Therefore the great transformation has to be combined with a just transition. This entails the shrinking of some sectors (e.g., those with a high turnover of raw materials), and the growth of others (e.g., the entire care economy). In any case, economic growth should be de-coupled from material growth. Temporarily, *qualitative growth* is necessary. After all, various national economies have deficiencies in the area of reproduction, especially those in the so-called global south. As a result, it is counterproductive to operate on the grounds of a simple juxtaposition of “pro-growth” and “post-growth” positions. The recent debates in the global south about *Buen Vivir* (“the good life,”) and social-ecological modes of development that go beyond western life-styles transcend standard conceptions of growth and modernization. In this context, it is also important to avoid false juxtapositions: “Development” and “modern” civilization are not problematic concepts as such. They become problematic once they are bound up with certain forms of capitalist (or state socialist) expansion and the corresponding social relations of nature. At the political level, we have to work on “translating” the experiences of actors from different contexts. This will create opportunities for linking up social-ecological and transformative struggles in the global south with those in the north.

*Just transitions* are about creating new perspectives for the people worst affected by the climate crisis. But they also take into account the situation of the workers, communities and countries faced with increases in cost of living and a fundamental restructuring of employment, which may be caused by the switch to renewables and the conversion of certain industries, for example the arms industry. In this sense, the initiatives for a just transition try to bring together the movement for climate justice and the labour movement. In any other scenario, social and ecological interests are either played off against each other or the interests of the working classes and of employees more generally (a better environment, a conscious way of consuming, more jobs) are simply not considered. These are some *criteria* for a just transition to green socialism: It should be assessed whether the measures taken contribute to

- a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions;
- a drop in poverty and vulnerability;
- a decline in income inequality and other forms of inequality;
- the creation of jobs and the promotion of “good work”; and
- the democratic participation of individuals.

Obviously, this list can be extended endlessly. Nevertheless, these points are crucial for developing a provisional method of quantitative evaluation, which can be used for political interventions.

## Participatory Planning

The need to instigate quick structural change under conditions of “time pressure” (Schumann 2011) also means that it is necessary to phase in *participative planning*, *consultas populares*, *people’s planning processes* and decentralized democratic councils. (The introduction of regional councils formed part of the recent German debate on the crisis of car manufacturing and the export industries, cf. IG Metall Esslingen 2009, Lötzer 2010, Candeias/Röttger 2009). There are some historical instances where planning proved highly effective in bringing about social change that had to be achieved quickly (e.g., the New Deal

in the U.S. in the 1930s and 40s). Joseph Schumpeter was passionately in favour of the “creative destruction” caused by capitalism; nevertheless, even he spoke of the “superiority of the socialist central plan” (1942, 310ff). Considering the need for a quick transition, socialists have a strong case for planning – but this time it should be participatory planning (Williamson 2010). This approach to planning is the only one capable of establishing a mode of societalization that breaks with the obsolete relations of power and property in capitalism. In the light of negative experiences with authoritarian and centralized planning mechanisms, experimenting with participatory planning at the regional level might be the right entry point. Another potential entry point is the democratization and decentralization of existing transregional processes of planning, for example in healthcare, energy, the railways, education etc. The global allocation of raw material and resources is a more difficult issue: it seems hard to envisage the democratization of the modes of planning used by international organizations and transnational corporations.

## Real Democracy

The crisis of representation and legitimacy of the political system is in many ways linked to the fact that the political system does not take into account the essential needs of the people, and that they are not invited to participate in decision-making. The public sphere should be extended with the aim of creating a “provision economy,” but this should be accompanied by the radical *democratization of the state*. The ‘benevolent,’ paternalistic and patriarchal welfare state from Fordist times; authoritarian state socialism; the neoliberal restructuring of public services on the grounds of the principles of competition and managerial efficiency – none of these ventures had an emancipatory character. A left-wing state project has to instigate the extension of participation and transparency demanded by the new movements for democracy and to work for the absorption of the state into civil society, as Gramsci put it. Participation does not just mean that people are able to voice their opinion, but that they are able to influence decision-making. This is where the movement against Stuttgart 21 converges with Occupy and the Indignad@s. The authoritarian-neoliberal mode of crisis management, in contrast, is at odds with this principle.

Yet democratization is not just about the public dimension of the state, but also about the *economy*. Today, there are serious doubts about the socio-economic “contribution” of management strategies based on *shareholder value*. This is due to their short-termism and their part in the financial crisis, in excessive remuneration for senior managers, tax evasion, mass redundancies and environmental destruction. Similarly, the classic forms of firm-level co-determination have proven incapable of challenging the pressure of transnational competition and of the dominance of finance. Sometimes, co-determination bodies became entangled in practices of collaboration and corruption. Therefore, it is time for a democratization of the economy that goes beyond co-determination and the in-depth participation of employees, trade unions, the consumers and the wider population in firm-level decision-making (along the lines of the entire transnational chain of production).

It is vital that all the mechanisms discussed become part of a wider project that amplifies collective agency. In other words, they should enable individuals to become the protagonists of their own (hi)stories. It is “the task of every one of us to unify the divergent” (Peter Weiss [1975] 1983, 204). The resulting association should be seen as a political association – as a left-in-transformation, which is aware of the fact that its political goals can only be achieved through fierce struggles (Goldschmidt et al. 2008, 836ff). •

Translated from the German by Alexander Gallas.

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