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Pathways to Ecological Transition – Part I

EDITORIAL

This is the first of a double special issue dedicated to the question of ecological transition. It is the result of ongoing efforts by the Editorial Board of *Agrarian South* to provide a platform for research produced by young and veteran scholars especially in the South on the grave ecological challenges of our times. Some of the articles and ideas appearing here were first presented at our annual Summer School in 2022, co-organized by the Sam Moyo African Institute for Agrarian Studies and the Agrarian South Network. Other papers were received subsequently.

The harnessing of non-human nature by monopoly capital in the peripheries of the world economy has become a central concern in the current stage of systemic crisis. The free appropriation of nature from the peripheries is not new, yet its manifestations and character have been altered with the reemergence of finance capital and its hyper-speculative force. There has been an intensified penetration of corporate foreign investments in the peripheries, especially in nature-based industries such as forest produce and wood-based products, fishing, mineral extraction, and land and food systems, while the climate debate has also shifted the onus for preserving the ecological balance of the planet onto the countries of the South themselves. Moreover, the very preservation of nature is being increasingly turned into an enterprise for profit, as in the rapid development of carbon markets.

These systemic tendencies have unleashed new rounds of primitive accumulation and new forms of rent-seeking which have intensified exploitation and oppression in the peripheries, resulting in direct conflict between nature-dependent peoples and the corporate monopolies. Ecological conflict, local and global, is intrinsic to the current systemic crisis. Competing perspectives on nature and its place in society are now yielding conflicting political strategies on a wide range of issues, from the commons and sustainable cities to climate engineering and ‘green’ humanitarian intervention. And there is, indeed, a powerful counter-movement aiming to reinvent monopoly capitalism as ‘green capitalism’.

Environmental scenarios remain catastrophic for the majority of the world's population, located in the world's peripheries. A global transition can only be just if it entails redistribution of resources in the interest of working and oppressed peoples. The notion of a just transition is itself being widely disputed, by popular movements, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, think tanks, big business, and governments. Although it originates in a critique of dominant discourses on sustainable development, now corporate monopolies, multilateral organizations, and Northern governments are appropriating the idea to promote their own versions of clean energy and its prudent use, particularly in the South. We must therefore advance our own understanding of the relationship between ecological crisis, patterns of accumulation, and the alternatives.

Recent research and debate have thrown light on the role of nature in the *longue durée* of primary production and social reproduction in the peripheries. The expansion of capitalism from its North Atlantic birthplace decimated or remolded pre-capitalist social systems and ecologies with either stable social metabolisms or only regionalized propensities for metabolic rift. The long-term effects of capitalist expansion, including its industrial transformation under monopoly control, have established global patterns of uneven development and put in question no less than survival on this planet for the bulk of humanity, the peasantries, working classes, and the indigenous and traditional peoples constituting the system's global relative surplus population.

The historical expansion of capitalism has been based on various resource control regimes in the peripheries whose legacies persist to the present. Under colonialism, resource control was achieved by the establishment of extensive private property in the settler colonies, or the subordination of social norms and customs to capitalist exploitation and the trusteeship of colonial authorities. Such resource control regimes persisted after decolonization and accelerated under neoliberalism, as the global neocolonial order was consolidated. To this day, they are deployed against local systems of production and social reproduction, facilitating encroachment against fertile lands, forests, and water resources. Long after political decolonization, they continue to expel peasantries and traditional peoples from the countryside and into the world's burgeoning labour reserves, in overcrowded cities and across international boundaries under desperate and lethal conditions. Meanwhile, Northern centers continue to consume the labour and raw materials of the peripheries through environmentally-mediated

unequal exchange, using less of their own physical-natural environment and drawing on the use values of natural resources of the South.

New agricultural frontiers are being pried open by corporate agriculture, mining, and finance by means of new land grabs for extractive and processing industries, or monocrops and tree plantations, including for carbon credits, 'green' energy, and biofuels. Global value systems in agriculture, mining, and industry have been advancing at an accelerated pace against peasant producers and indigenous, quilombola, and traditional peoples. Customary control over resources has been receding under capitalist advance, often succumbing to cooptation through its own internal social cleavages. State-controlled resource regimes themselves, in the *dirigiste* or current neoliberal period, have moved against historically oppressed social groups, especially women, the racially oppressed, and lower castes. The metropolitan centres have also pushed the peripheries into new roles as reservoirs for the waste products of industrial capitalist development in the course of export-oriented industrialization, while extending capitalist markets under their monopoly control to global atmospheric commons and CO2 absorption capacities. These are today new obstacles to the development of the South, which set the stage for the uneven impact of environmental change and climactic instability.

The neoliberal escalation of unequal exchange under the aegis of monopoly-finance capital poses existential threats. New genocides are clearly on the agenda of the twenty-first century. The commons continue to be crucial to the social reproduction of working and oppressed peoples, across the rural-urban divide, even while buttressing labor reserves and super-exploitation. New alternatives must now be sought in the interest of working people and historically oppressed groups for the exercise of sovereign control over resources. At a basic level, the reclaiming of land and territories from settler and corporate monopolies is necessary for the advancement of sovereign and popular control over the commons, for the South's own industrial and sustainable development. At a planning level, this requires experimenting with a mix of resource control systems to assess and enhance their egalitarian and sustainable potential, including traditional and modern agro-ecological systems, pastoral ecology, climate-proofed and urban agriculture, and forms of communing in pooled resources, whether living, such as fisheries, or semi-living, like aquifers and shared hydraulic systems. On another level, it requires a new scientific endeavor for the advancement of popular knowledge, the establishment of sovereign industrial linkages, a resurrection of people's and appropriate technology, within an egalitarian and sustainable perspective.

It also requires social mobilization embedded in a larger strategy towards socialist transition, seeking ideologically oriented rural-urban unity among working people and oppressed groups, and strategic thinking on the vexing issues of state power and international solidarity. Popular responses to the ecological crisis have generally been led by rural-based movements for land and agrarian reform, traditional, quilombola and indigenous people's movements, women's movements, and certain broader political forces spanning the rural-urban divide and struggling for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice. This diversity has yielded a broad operational and ideological spectrum, from diffused, localized, low-profile struggles, to organized social justice movements employing constitutional means in defense of alternative modes of living, social organization, production, and consumption, to radical land movements and armed struggles with an autonomist or national liberation perspective. This spectrum also includes a plethora of organizations dependent on corporate and Northern funding, with the capacity to coopt and confuse the objectives of ecological transition. The historic questions concerning the social base, leadership, strategy, tactics, ideology, and international alliances of such movements thus remain on the table and are key to understanding the challenges and possibilities ahead.

In this first edition of the double special issue, we publish four articles which broach a range of issues. The first, by Max Ajl, entitled 'Theories of Political Ecology: Monopoly Capital against People and the Planet', engages with and critiques dominant theories of political ecology, taking the theory of ecologically unequal exchange (EUE) as the framework of critique. It assesses the claims of 'fossil capitalism', eco-modernism, extractivism, and de-growth, as well as the theories of 'post-development'. It finds that, with the exception of de-growth, none of them take imperialism or the global history of accumulation sufficiently seriously and either displace transformative obligations wholly onto the South, or adopt a framework which centers merely the agency of the Northern working class or a class-blind 'movement of movements'. Ajl proposes modifications to the theory of EUE based on the polarized nature of neocolonial accumulation and waste production and distribution. Ajl uses this framework to identify the anti-systemic role of nature-reliant peripheral semi-proletarian classes, and from there re-opens the debate on appropriate-scale industrialization along with ecological transformations of agriculture as paths to development in the twenty-first century.

Paulo S.C. Neves and Rita S. Liberato, in their article entitled 'Traditional Communities, Development and the Commons: Movements by Collectors of Wild Fruits in Northeastern Brazil', focus on the specific experience of Mangaba Collectors in the Northeastern Brazilian state of Sergipe in northeastern Brazil to investigate problems and dilemmas faced today by traditional communities living in the commons. The way of life of mangaba collectors has been modified because of real estate speculation and the extensive cultivation of crops in their traditional territories of extraction. This community has thus been forced to organize politically and create partnership networks in civil society and the scientific community to address the crisis. However, the opportunity to sell products made from mangaba in the consumer market has created an ambiguity within the movement, with some seeking to maintain the logic of the commons and others seeking to expand insertion into the market.

Newman Tekwa and Jimi O. Adesina, in 'Land, Water and Gender Questions in South Africa: A Transformative Social Policy Perspective', address the heated debate around Section 25 of the South African Constitution and the principle of 'expropriation of land without compensation'. They argue that what is conspicuously missing in this debate is the link between land, water, and gender questions. Within former settler colonies, the 'land question' is a 'water question' and by extension a 'gender question'. The racially inequitable land distribution, codified in the Native Land Act of 1913, has mirrored the unequal distribution of rights and access to water as codified in the Water Act of 1956, such that land and water reforms today are inextricable. This, furthermore, is compounded by the gender question, in which lack of access to land for women mutates into lack of access to other productive resources. Secondary data analysis reveals that blacks control only 5.8 percent of agricultural water uses, while black women control less that 1 percent. The authors argue that such contradictions of race, class, and gender ought to remain the focus of transformative social policy in South Africa.

Rodrigo Constante Martins, in 'Land and Water in Rural São Paulo: A Case Study of Environmental Inequalities in Brazil', also brings focus to the governance of environmental resources in rural territories and, in particular, on conflicts surrounding the management of water in the state of São Paulo. Martins examines in detail the tensions and conflicts in water governance promoted by River Basin Committees. The case study, carried out in the municipality of Barra Bonita between 2000 and 2010, has used qualitative social research techniques, focusing on semi-structured interviews, utilizing oral reports, and documentary surveys. Martins demonstrates how different agrarian and agricultural contexts reproduce

specific forms of inequalities in access to water, thus compromising the promotion of lasting standards of environmental justice at the local level.

The next issue of *Agrarian South* will give continuity to these concerns and broaden further the geographical and thematic focus.

In this regard, we are also pleased to announce that, as of 2023, the journal will appear with higher frequency, in quarterly format. After ten years of growth and consolidation, we are now in the position to provide for an expanded publication platform, with a new issue appearing every three months. We thank you for your continued support!

The Editors