

Book Review

Vishwas Satgar (ed.) (2018) *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-socialist Alternatives.*

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In 2015 the World Meteorological Organisation announced that planetary temperatures had reached a 1 per cent increase higher than the period prior to the Industrial Revolution. With this warming of the planet, extreme weather conditions such as droughts, hurricanes, heatwaves, and drier conditions enabling fires and floods are becoming more commonplace. Sea levels are also rising, placing many low-lying communities, populous coastal cities and island states in jeopardy. As we fail to address the climate crisis, it becomes more complex and costly.

This comprehensive volume of fifteen well-researched chapters deals with a puzzle. The overwhelming majority of climate scientists – over 97 per cent – acknowledge that humans are the primary cause of climate change, but climate negotiations are not generating appropriate solutions that match the scale of the crisis. Indeed, climate change is happening faster than predicted, taking us rapidly closer to a 2 per cent increase in planetary temperatures as the market extends to the oceans – the so-called “blue economy”.

The volume offers two explanations for this failure to act against the climate crisis. The first factor is the asymmetry of political and negotiating power between climate denialists in the Global North and the vulnerable peoples of the Global South. Secondly, climate change is not seen as the result of the capitalist economic model, a model that the authors believe leads to plunder, waste and pollution. The volume develops a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, arguing that the current fossil fuel energy model of production and consumption is the cause of ecological destruction. The editor, Vishwas Satgar, calls it a US-led model of “imperial ecocide” (p. 14).

The alternative to the climate crisis, the volume suggests, lies in a democratic eco-socialist alternative. It is an ambitious and wide-ranging global response involving at least five main components:

- Food sovereignty – the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and agricultural systems.
- Deglobalisation through the promotion of local production and consumption by reducing the free trade of goods that travel long distances, the transport of which emits millions of tons of carbon dioxide.
- A challenge to the dominant Anthropocene discourse that tries to control and dominate nature. Instead the authors see humans as an integral part of nature and argue for the need to protect

indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous value systems such as *ubuntu* in Southern Africa or *sumak kawsay* in Ecuador.¹

- A “Just Transition” from fossil fuel, which includes certain policy proposals such as the idea of a Universal Basic Income Grant and a campaign for climate jobs.
- A critique of the GDP growth paradigm, including the idea of an alternative gross national happiness (GNH) index. This alternative society-centred approach has been institutionalised in the small mountain kingdom of Bhutan through a GNH Index that measures “development in all its dimensions” (p. 159). Devan Pillay sees the roots of an eco-socialist vision in the non-western ancient thought of the Axial Age of 800–200 BCE when the major religions of Hinduism and Buddhism emerged. “They departed”, Pillay suggests, “from other more tribal, patriarchal and socially violent religious dogma and practice during their time by emphasizing universal love, respect for all human beings and nature, social equality and social justice for all – with a strong emphasis on personal liberation from suffering as a vital precondition for the liberation of others” (p. 158).

Underlying the volume is a broader left project aimed at the construction of a democratic Marxism that speaks to the grassroots anti-capitalist movements of the twenty-first century. It is the third volume in the Democratic Marxism series. The series takes as its point of departure a rejection of what the editors see as “the crisis of orthodox and vanguardist Marxism associated mainly with hierarchical communist parties, and imposed, even as state ideology, as the ‘correct’ Marxism” (p. 10). The project aims to ensure that the inherent categories of Marxism find meaning and are theorised within constantly changing historical conditions.

The Democratic Marxism series is an imaginative and exciting initiative, and *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-socialist Alternatives* is an excellent example of this new democratic Marxism in practice. It is utopian in its vision but concrete in its analysis. It is also open to other forms of anti-capitalist thought and practice, including currents within radical ecology, feminism and indigenous thought. If Marxism is to have a future as a body of thought and practice, it is from initiatives such as this that its future will be shaped.

Three key challenges that emerge from this volume face any attempt to solve the climate crisis through a global and democratic eco-socialist alternative. The first is the problem of “false solutions”. The volume has two chapters on examples of false solutions – one on genetically modified foods, and the other on nuclear energy.

Nimmo Bassey focuses on the false solutions produced by food multinationals such as Monsanto who promote genetically modified foods and what he calls “seed colonialism”. He argues for food sovereignty as a human right and prioritises local food systems and local markets. Food sovereignty, he argues, goes beyond the provision of wholesome food and fights hunger by ensuring that local farmers maintain control of their farming and food systems. “We can”, he argues, “only secure food sovereignty by supporting the majority of our farmers in their small-scale agro-ecological farming” (p. 205).

David Fig examines what he sees as the false solution of nuclear energy as a way of breaking with a coal-based electricity economy as it fails to take into account the entire fuel chain in which, in

¹ *Buen vivir* is a Western translation of the indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay*. I would like to thank Jörg Nowak for clarifying the origins of the concept.

some stages, carbon intensity is considerable. It is also punitive in terms of costs and would add massively to the debt crisis facing South Africa.

Both examples of false solutions – genetically modified foods and nuclear power – raise questions about the state and how economic and social policies are developed and implemented. Grassroots movements are foregrounded as agents of change, but the volume would have benefitted by more examples of how these false solutions were successfully challenged. Fig's chapter was written before the fall of South African president Jacob Zuma who supported nuclear power. Fig provides an excellent analysis of what he calls the “parallel narrative of patrimonial politics” and the “narratives of resistance”, showing how the interaction between the state and social movements challenged nuclear power (pp. 258–68). But, and I am sure Fig would agree, the suspension of nuclear power was the outcome of struggles inside the ruling party rather than the struggle from below by the NGO Earthlife Africa.

The power of patrimonial politics leads to the second issue, the nature of the transition to a democratic eco-socialist alternative. Michelle Williams examines the unexplored connection between energy production and democracy. She argues persuasively for a more expansive form of democracy in which popular forces control the dispensation of public and private goods, ensuring redistribution and the pursuit of social and economic justice. The tension, which Karl Polanyi described in *The Great Transformation* (1944), between the self-regulating market and society is also, she argues, a struggle between two types of democracy – one limited, the other opening up space for popular control over the commons, including public goods (pp. 234–5). “Energy democracy”, she argues, provides an important avenue for communities, including workers in the energy sector, to a just transition, expansive democracy and the promotion of renewables. This approach has been championed by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which has “put forward concrete proposals for the way in which its own carbon-intensive sector can be restructured toward renewable energy production in a way that creates jobs and deepens a broad democratization process” (p. 247).

Williams makes an excellent point, but ensuring a democratic transition is a tough challenge. In his concluding remarks to the volume Satgar suggests that countries “will increasingly become fascist as zones of privileged existence are protected for the few, while policing and imposing regimes of dispossessing life at the frontiers of complex hydrocarbon extraction, land grabs for export-led food production, collapsing societies due to climate shocks and flexible accumulation premised on wageless majorities” (p. 338). NUMSA's bold plans for an energy democracy have stalled in the face of powerful private-sector initiatives and internal struggles within NUMSA.

Jacklyn Cock highlights differences inside COSATU over how to approach a just transition.² She shows how the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has become increasingly defensive of the interests of some 90 000 coal miners in the face of the threats of job losses from mine closures and demands from environmental activists to “keep the coal in the hole”. NUMSA's vision, on the other hand, was of a socially owned renewable energy sector and other forms of community energy enterprises such as public utilities, cooperatives or municipally owned entities. Instead of an “energy democracy”, she argues that there has been a shift to a low-carbon economy dominated by privatised

² Incidentally, Cock is wrong to suggest that the membership of the South African Communist Party (SACP) has declined from 75 000 in 1995. Its membership has dramatically increased since then to over 300 000 members at its last congress in 2017.

energy-renewal programmes – what Cock calls “green capitalism”.

This raises the third issue: who is to drive a just transition to a democratic eco-socialist alternative? Andrew Bennie and Athish Satgoor focus on the need to realise a just transition through a movement from below around the struggle for food sovereignty. This involves, they argue, re-embedding labour democratically within human creativity, production and nature through a solidarity economy. The authors explore this alternative around food and land through the examination of a grassroots movement, the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC). At the centre of their analysis is the need to understand power, a power “that goes beyond purely revolutionary notions of radical change” to develop a form of activism and politics ... that seeks to build power to push back the frontiers of capitalism and actively construct an alternative” (p. 301). They give as an example the hosting of a food sovereignty festival in the inner city of Johannesburg which combined a celebration with popular education. What is missing from their analysis are examples of a broad movement from below challenging the dominant food regime.

Brian Ashley, writing of South Africa, suggests the need for a new political bloc to drive the transition, “drawn from organized labour; small and medium-sized enterprises with strong roots in the local economy; community based social movements representing unemployed sectors of society; enlightened and radical environmental activists; and the potentially new organic intellectuals of the radicalizing student movement” (pp. 289–90).

If labour is seen as a leading force in this power bloc, it raises the difficult question of jobs. Ashley draws a useful distinction between climate jobs – jobs that help to reduce the emission of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) and could involve developing renewable energy plants and small-scale agriculture – and what he calls “green jobs”. Green jobs are environmentally friendly jobs, such as in conservation and cleaning up oil spills. Ashley is highly critical of green jobs and the green economy, which he sees as a strategy to drive investment into fixing the damage capitalism is doing to the environment. His chapter analyses the Million Climate Jobs Campaign developed in 2011, which estimated that three million jobs could be created (this has been updated and reduced to one million sustainable and quality jobs, p. 280).

Ashley’s approach is consistent with the South American approach of *buen vivir*, living well. *Buen vivir* is presented by Alberto Acosta and Mateo Martinez Abarca as a perspective from the Global South that opens up the possibility of transitioning to a new, self-sufficient economy where local production is prioritised and the human being, not capital, is the starting point. “If human beings are the backbone of the economy”, the authors state, “work becomes functional as part of their well-being. This entails recognizing every form of work, both productive and reproductive. The world of work is an essential part of the solidarity economy, also understood as the work economy” (p. 142).

But the idea of a world where “work is an essential part of the solidarity economy” could be at odds with the idea of a Universal Basic Income Grant. It certainly is at odds with Andre Gorz’s *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work* cited in the excellent chapter by Hein Marais. Ashley starts a conversation on what we mean by a job, but the volume remains ambiguous on what an eco-socialist approach to employment could be.

Clearly the idea of an eco-socialist alternative is drawn from different experiments, institutional innovations and global connections at the local level. It is not yet a developed programme, but this volume does develop an alternative vision. Discussions on a democratic alternative to the current neo-liberal global order often flounder because people believe they are not possible. The crucial point is that the alternative is not given. It has to be imagined and constructed, especially as neo-

liberal hegemony has knocked the imagination out of the movement. Importantly, such an imagination has to be drawn from distinct places; it has to be grounded in the local, but it has to connect place to place.³ In *The Climate Crisis* place and power are being reimagined. This is the challenge facing engaged intellectuals in the era of globalisation. And this is the challenge that this volume meets so successfully and persuasively.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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³ This argument is developed in the concluding chapter of Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout (2008).