

Capital Versus Biosphere: An Eco-social Agenda Fit for the Times

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February 18, 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has been a reminder of humanity's inherent interconnection with the natural world. At the same time, the crisis threatens to further deprioritise climate action when it is needed most urgently. Joan Herrera i Torres, former leader of the Catalan Green party, proposes an eco-social agenda for post-Covid Europe based on three key elements: protecting biodiversity, valuing the local, and accelerating energy transition. In the wake of the crisis, Europe is uniquely positioned to pursue a recovery that responds to both present and future needs.

The defining conflict of the 20th century was the conflict between capital and work. With the turn of the century the gender conflict came to the fore, paving the way for feminism to break the public-private boundary and show how the system is carried on the broad shoulders of women and their caregiving. Today, all signs suggest that the conflict set to erupt in the 21st century is between capital and biosphere – a conflict which exposes the physical limits of growth and the mass species extinction that characterises our era, the Anthropocene. Previous conflicts have not disappeared; on the contrary, they have worsened, but they now exist in a world where humankind is testing the limits of the very space in which we live.

The fire, as Greta Thunberg puts it, is spreading through the house. As temperatures continue to break records, the meagre results of international climate action reveal a disconnect between most of the world's governments and science.

Configuring the post-Covid world

The Covid-19 crisis could see the climate agenda pushed even further to the margins. The unprecedented measures taken over the past year have been justified by arguments that they are necessary to respond to a “real” emergency such as the pandemic. These arguments distinguish between what is deemed an emergency (stopping the spread of the virus) and what is deemed an ominous forewarning (the environmental crisis). Climate change thus becomes an intangible phenomenon that affects the planet rather than a tangible emergency that harms individuals. This obscures the very real impacts of climate change on people's lives: flooded homes and neighbourhoods; extreme heat and cold endured by the most vulnerable; and a lack of protection in the face of biodiversity loss. Moreover, climate change and species loss is closely linked with the context in which pandemics flourish and therefore the vulnerability of humankind.

In a world where collapse is possible, prevention must be front and centre when it comes to devising and implementing public policies

The Covid-19 crisis is evidence that collapse on a global scale is possible. It has become clear that we are intricately connected at a global level, beyond the limits of our immediate communities and countries. The pandemic has brought about an irreversible change of outlook. For decades, resource allocation has been oriented towards increasing market efficiency; basic rights such as healthcare have been commodified; competitiveness has taken precedence over cooperation. In a world where collapse is possible, prevention must be front and centre when it comes to devising and implementing public policies aimed at combatting climate change and building resilience. Rugged individualism will no longer wash.

The push to ensure that public interests, the decommodification of fundamental rights, and cooperation prevail demands a new eco-social agenda that aims to be hegemonic. This agenda should focus on three key aspects: biodiversity, the local, and energy transition.

Protecting biodiversity

In a post-Covid world, policy that protects and promotes biodiversity must become a priority. The ongoing mass destruction of species has until now been low down governments' agendas. Today, biodiversity loss and health can be clearly linked. As part of this planet, humanity's greatest guarantee of survival is the preservation of ecosystem services which provide essential benefits for human health.

To give one example: a debate in Barcelona in recent years has centred around the possible expansion of the airport and its impact on nearby protected areas, in particular the Llobregat Delta. The expansion threatened to affect a reservoir of biodiversity in this area, and completely overlooked the importance of nearby agricultural land. Today, the best strategy for any metropolitan area is to have spaces dedicated to the protection of biodiversity and farmland to encourage local production.

Valuing the local

This leads us to the second vital component of a new eco-social agenda: the local. This can be broken down into two fundamental aspects. The first involves the care economy, and increasing the value – both in social and economic terms – attached to the everyday labour of caring for others which is so often carried out by women. The pandemic has laid bare how care work – often poorly paid or simply unpaid – forms the foundations of life. Recognising the value of this work and reassessing salaries to acknowledge what market logic is yet to comprehend is a key part of an eco-social strategy.

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The second aspect relates to localised supply and value chains. The health crisis has exposed the vulnerability of societies dependent on goods that, despite being relatively simple to produce, are only manufactured thousands of miles away. The fact that face masks had to be shipped to Europe from China highlights the fragility of current models of production and consumption. The trend that began in the 1980s in countries such as the United Kingdom of phasing out domestic agriculture to replace it with cheaper products grown elsewhere ceases to make sense.

Globalised, hyper-connected economies have feet of clay; this crisis has evidenced the need for a rethink. Spain's service industry will suffer enormously in a world in which tourism holds less weight, and the country must be able to counteract this dependency by tilting its economy towards more local production chains that can internalise the cost of transporting goods.

Energy as a vehicle for change

The third pillar of the eco-social agenda is energy. Not only because energy is a way to tackle the challenge of climate change, but because it is a starting point from which to rethink the production model. Throughout history, energy has been a means to gain power and control. Today, there is no reason why control over energy sources should remain in the hands of a few corporations instead of being more widely distributed. Moving towards a new energy model would reduce Spain's energy dependence, which, at 74 per cent, stands well above the EU average (60 per cent). In Catalonia, the figure reaches 90 per cent due to the low penetration of renewable energies.

Today, unlike after the 2008 financial crisis, the cheapest energy by far comes from renewable sources. In the case of solar power, prices have dropped drastically in recent years. A new energy model based on decarbonisation could also help redistribute wealth and create a production and industrial framework with savings, efficiency, renewable generation, and demand management.

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In many ways, this new energy agenda is about changing habits. The best kind of energy is energy saved, and now is the moment to double down on saving and efficiency policies to ensure that positive changes linked to reduced energy consumption that have emerged during the pandemic are maintained, for example remote working. Energy transition will hinge on the transformation of mobility, with greater emphasis on working from home, walking, cycling, public transport and ride sharing – in that order. This means moving from a culture of vehicle ownership to a culture of shared services. Air quality as a primary public health issue affecting cities today only makes this shift more urgent. The urban agenda is one of the most complex in the political arena, but nothing is more important when it comes improving quality of life and instigating a real energy transition.

The energy agenda also presents an opportunity for depopulated parts of rural Spain (read more the rural-urban divide in Spain) known as *España vaciada* (“emptied Spain”). These regions have the potential to offer more than beautiful scenery – they can also offer economic activity, production, and industry. Electricity generation stimulates employment, which in turn brings increased investment in the region and development. The expansion of renewable energy should be carried out in a progressive way, with generation models that reward investments made by local energy communities. At a time when the service industry is at risk of regressing dramatically, the energy agenda can be part of a move towards the re-industrialisation of Spain.

However, we must be aware of the limitations posed by the scarcity of the rare minerals needed to manufacture these technologies, as well as the limits to growth on a finite planet. There can be no technocratic illusion: the social model must change, and sustainability will not be achieved without political friction. A new energy model alone is not enough, though it would represent a significant breakthrough.

A global agenda, a European proposal

Every global challenge requires a degree of global governance, and there is much work to be done in this respect. Under the Trump administration the US was out of the picture, resulting in a lack of global leadership. Meanwhile, the EU has failed to make an appearance. The election of President Joe Biden may be more conducive to an environmental agenda but the number of voters who remained loyal to Trump shows that his administration was the political expression of a social bloc that is alive and kicking.

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Despite such a gloomy outlook, the emergence of regional and continental leaders capable of establishing a more definitive agenda is of prime importance. The EU has the potential to be such a leader. High levels of energy dependence in Europe force the EU institutions to devise much more decisive policy than in other regions. In turn, the need to find new sectors for development makes the environmental agenda – and energy in particular – a determining factor in changing the production model.

After 2008, the European Union was caught up in its Calvinist austerity policies. In the wake of the current crisis, austerity policies may still make a return, a possibility which applies to Southern Europe as well as Central and Northern Europe. Moving forward, greenwashed solutions pose another threat. The challenge will be to ensure that investment is channeled into the recovery of public interests and social cohesion, responding to both present and future needs – in other words, following a green logic. Reviving Europe's economy demands an economic plan that works towards socio-ecological transformation.

The path ahead presents risks but also opportunities. To take advantage of these, the Greens will need the support of forces not yet on board and to build hegemony. Tackling climate change will necessarily involve acting not alone but with others. The way out is collective; that is to say, political. The environmental transition will filter through the entire social structure, from the collective imagination to legislation, through every budget of different administrations.

This century will be the century of climate change, where all conflicts will centre around the conflict between capital and biosphere. The question is no longer whether this will alter the foundations upon which policies and politics have been built, but when. The impacts of climate change will be felt widely and deeply, exacerbating tensions across a broad range of issues from migration to wealth distribution to gender inequalities. It remains to be seen whether the political agenda and emerging proposals will be up to the challenge, or whether they will blindly continue down a path of self-destruction. A modern, democratic society is one that knows how to anticipate future problems. A weak society is one that drags its feet before a challenge. For Catalonia and many other places in Europe that are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts, there is much at stake.



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Published February 18, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/capital-versus-biosphere-an-eco-social-agenda-fit-for-the-times/>

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