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Outgrowing Degrowth: The Case for Ecosocialist Abundance

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Caught between a return to an ecologically blind abundance agenda and degrowth environmentalism that offers no aspirational material vision, ecosocialism can choose a third option: a version of ecological modernisation that champions abundance within planetary boundaries. Revolutions in renewable energy and agriculture bring this outcome within reach.

"The worst possible crisis, at the worst possible moment." Xan López's concise, clear-eyed diagnosis summarises the Left's position 25 years into the 21st century. We are faced with a political turning point, one that threatens to wipe out democracy and the planet itself in one fell swoop. A reactionary political wave is surging, and must be stopped before it achieves the neoliberal goal of undoing all social progress made since 1945 – even the political progress made since the French Revolution of 1789 is under threat. At the same time, we must fight this wave while also decarbonising the planet within the next 25 years. Failure to do so could result in a climate breakdown that, if left unabated, could leave 3 billion people stuck in uninhabitable regions by the end of the century, thus jeopardising the very existence of civilisation as we know it.

These two colossal tasks will determine the course of our species long into the future, but both rely on the Left at a time when the movement is politically weak and poorly organised; perhaps the lowest point in its entire history. A strategic rethink is now an existential imperative.

The abundance agenda

In recent years, one proposal in particular has impacted the renewal of leftist policy: the abundance agenda. This paradigm emerged after the publication of Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's 2025 book *Abundance*, and proposes that the Left cannot simply settle for the redistribution of scarce resources – it has to rediscover its own productivism and offer a new strategy for material expansion. In order to recover its ability to propel massive infrastructure projects – whether in housing, transport, or energy – Klein and Thompson propose that the Left must abandon its current political ethos of shying away from material change. According to their diagnosis, some progressives have retreated into a political culture of caution, regulation, protection, and the preventive vetoing of anything that could upset the established social balance, even when innovations could solve urgent social problems such as Western society's housing crisis.

In many respects, Klein and Thompson's book is too US-centric. Not all countries face the same obstacles of hyper-regulation as the US, and many Americans see their relative material stagnation as a sign of an empire in decline, in contrast to China's rapid rise. *Abundance* received well-deserved criticism from the Left for its tendency to conflate democratic participation with bureaucratic stagnation, as well as for its centrist (or liberal, to a US audience) concern for the supply of goods while failing to question artificial scarcity, markets, or capitalist property structures.

Nevertheless, the book has resonated far beyond the US progressive scene because it highlights something that the Western Left is missing: that the possibility of restoring our power lies in rebuilding a

tangible, compelling, and unapologetic promise of collective prosperity, just as it did in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Matt Huber, Leigh Phillips, and Fred Stafford write in their article "Abundance for the 99 Percent", "The anarchists planned to take over the mines, not shut them down."

One of the Left's biggest political mistakes over the last 50 years has been limiting itself to protecting egalitarian moral values, thus handing the enticing rhetoric of aspiration and civilisation to the Right. However, simply expressing indignation and a desire to topple corrupt elites is not enough for a people to reach its full potential, something requisite for any process of transformation. There needs to be a horizon, an aiming point where things will one day get better. For much of the population – who suffer in precarity and acute material need, and who understand progress not as some tired teleological myth but as a legitimate expectation for survival – this "something better" will always entail an experience of material comfort, and even a certain degree of luxury, that the notion of abundance can offer.

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Degrowth thinking

If this historically obvious idea seems provocative to large parts of the progressive community, it is at least in part because ideas of degrowth environmentalism are exerting an ever-growing influence on ecosocialism – and by association, on the Left as a whole. The term degrowth (and its sibling post-development, born from the Global South's experiences of colonisation) covers a veritable galaxy of ideas that cannot be treated as a whole without straying into clichés. There is a huge difference between, for instance, Jason Hickel's post-capitalist environmentalism – which champions degrowth via a global "Green New Deal", a massive rollout of renewable energy – and programmes like that of Spain's Adrián Almazán and Luis González Reyes, who challenge the renewable nature of any large-scale industrial technology and advocate for degrowth based on mass rural, economic, social, and community development.[1]

However, some common ground remains. Both ends of the spectrum – though to varying degrees – criticise and reject economic growth; not solely from a moral standpoint, but also because it is biophysically impossible on a planet that is dangerously surpassing its ecological limits. Advocates of degrowth thus envisage a 21st century characterised by forced adaptation – with varying degrees of social disruption – to more constrained material conditions; a new era in which, compared with times of great industrial acceleration, various forms of relative and absolute scarcity will become the new norm. They argue that there is a metabolic bottleneck that technology cannot resolve, which will prevent us from continuing the rapid, expansive trends of the modern era – including population growth and mass urbanisation – that are an exception to the planet's historical norm.

Under degrowth, future sustainability can only derive from a corrective shift towards more restrictive material and environmental conditions. Degrowth scenarios range from gently bringing ourselves within planetary limits to predictions of widespread impoverishment and the collapse of industrial society, a material step backwards that we would need to willingly embrace and prepare for in order to minimise its impact. The degrowth movement also argues that this historic transformation could be mitigated to some extent through redistribution, socialising consumption, and cultural transformations in our everyday lives. Out of these schools of thought, however, the most politically astute understand that environmental austerity is deeply unappealing to the masses, and instead highlight the social abundance that will follow

and allow us to explore new ways of living beyond the modern age.

A non-Malthusian environmentalism

Ecosocialism's slide towards degrowth is not just a product of capitalism's broken metabolic systems – it is also fuelled by a cultural, ontological, and moral wariness of modernity as inherently alienating and oppressive, a shift that constitutes a refounding of the Left's historical strategy.

In the late 18th century, Nicolas de Condorcet and William Godwin laid the axiological foundation of progressive environmentalism. They did this by arguing that, among all of humanity's possible futures, there is potential for a virtuous circle between societal perfection and ever-increasing material abundance, a self-perpetuating loop that could be brought about through emancipatory political reforms. Thomas Malthus challenged this promise by highlighting the limits of nature as an obstacle that humanity could never overcome. Though his work focused on agricultural productivity – the great environmental cause of his era – his reasoning can be applied to all natural resources. For Malthus, the clash between nature's limits and human expansion constituted a universal condition – one that is as tragic as it is unavoidable. Accordingly, he suggested that any future for humanity would require societal restrictions, because scarcity could never truly be overcome. As Ernest García points out, this idea shaped the logic and core arguments – now endlessly revisited and reformulated – of two centuries of debate among the Left and the environmental movement.[2]

Malthusianism has been one of the most vital schools of thought in the environmental movement, and should not be exaggerated or misinterpreted. However, in a distorted yet somewhat effective way, neo-Malthusian environmentalism has introduced the Left to one of environmentalists' greatest contributions to philosophical thought: the notion of a natural limit that humanity's social or technological will cannot overcome. This naturalist realism – or, to use Marxist terms, the relatively autonomous reality traditionally categorised as "nature" – offers a vital antidote to the Left's socio-centric tendencies, especially because it reveals an ontological asymmetry that we are culturally programmed to deny: natural forces can be the undoing of any social project, but no social project can dictate the natural conditions of its own existence. For example, communism cannot magically reduce atmospheric CO2 levels, but a certain amount of atmospheric CO2 can thwart communism because it will thwart all forms of human civilisation. In the absence of this conceptual counterweight, contemporary humans tend to imbue technology with soothingly miraculous qualities, leaving ourselves unable to discern the dangers, harms, and pace of its environmental impacts.

There is an undeniable cognitive benefit to the idea of a Malthusian natural limit, but it comes at a high cost. Politically, it leads us into very dangerous territory, while also instilling a whole series of scientifically flawed assumptions in our way of thinking. In terms of political dangers, Neo-Malthusianism backs us into a rhetorical corner. In the best of cases, its arguments can easily be interpreted as backing a process of voluntary adaptation to poverty. In the worst, it runs the risk of normalising reactionary ideologies that take root all too easily in society. Ever since Garrett Hardin's lifeboat analogy laid the foundations of ecofascism, it has been clear that scarcity pairs well with competition, cruelty, hoarding, and the perceived right to defend one's threatened living space. As Carl Amery was the first to point out – followed more recently by authors such as Andreas Malm and Bruno Latour – the rise of the new far right is inseparable from pre-emptive reactions to an ecologically saturated world, one where supremacists would rather kill than share.[3]

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But apart from its political dangers, the Malthusian approach also has epistemological flaws – or, at the very least, it is confusingly open to interpretation when applied to specific historical situations. This is particularly true in a modern world-system of intensely interdependent global human networks, driven by unprecedented technological, economic, and scientific dynamism. While some maintain that the "Malthusian trap" persists in industrial civilisation, evidence has repeatedly disproved their warnings: Malthus himself was refuted, as were his intellectual successors, by the "population bomb" of the 1960s and Hubbert's peak oil theories, which predicted the imminent decline of oil in the 2000s. Malthusian environmentalism's predictions tend to be disproved because, while natural resources are limited, they are also unknown and dynamic. The resources we use in any given historical context are a combination of our planet's material potential, variable economic incentives, and technological developments.

However, there is another environmental philosophy which has freed itself from Malthusianism's problematic political and scientific influences, while also conserving some of its core truths. This current – which we can broadly call ecological modernisation – has often been scorned by the Left for its seeming collaboration with capitalist goals like sustainable development. It should not, however, be confused with its more extreme counterpart, ecomodernism, which advocates instead for a very particular form of radical Promethean modernisation, rejecting the precautionary principle in favour of technologies such as nuclear power, geoengineering, and transgenesis.

We can think of society's metabolism like that of an organism: it ingests materials and energy (input) from its surroundings and excretes waste and alterations (output) into its environment. Malthusianism and modernisation disagree not only in how much they trust or distrust technology, but also on what stage of social metabolism is subject to ecological limits. Malthusianism identifies the input as the weak link, interpreting unsustainability as scarcity, whether in the form of shortages or exhausted supplies. Modernisation points to the output, viewing the limit as saturation: carbon sinks overwhelmed by pollution, and destroyed or disrupted ecosystem functions. This difference matters. Politically speaking, the first leads us to view sustainability as a forced reduction in human demand (or even population) in the face of dwindling natural resources, and the future as a zero-sum or negative-sum material game. The second leads to a radical redesign of our socio-ecological metabolism and technosphere, compatible with the promise of progress as a positive-sum material game.

Caught between a return to a classical, ecologically blind abundance agenda and neo-Malthusian environmentalism that refuses to offer the people an aspirational material vision, ecosocialism requires a push towards a third option: a left-wing version of ecological modernisation that champions abundance within planetary boundaries. This ceases to sound like an oxymoron when we consider that, at this very moment, productive forces are undergoing a genuine revolution that is, in its content, origins, and potential, worthy of the label "ecological".

An ecological revolution

Thanks to Marx's famous, oft-quoted prologue to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a segment of Marxist thought has erroneously granted productive forces an almost automatic sense of historical agency. However, as philosopher César Rendueles argues, there is something about this tradition which, without any deterministic illusions, values the analyses of the social sciences and is politically worth championing: productive forces persistently condition both our relationship to the

biosphere and the possibility of social organising. This can be both restrictive and empowering. The concept of productive forces is not, of course, simply another way of referring to technology, but a socially structured, politically oriented, and disputed understanding of it. This nuance is vital because the biggest historical impacts of productive forces were not the result of technology alone – they were rooted in its widespread adoption and through deliberate deployment and politically driven economies of scale.

Today, humanity stands on the threshold of three revolutions in productive forces that will expand the anthropological sphere, with potentially disruptive impacts on its evolution. Two of these deserve the title of "ecological" because they bring the goal of sustainability within reach while also increasing productivity – even when measured in environmentally and socially destructive capitalist terms. Both were also born of ecological movements: first the renewable energy revolution, and second, the regenerative agriculture movement. The third revolution, the digital-cognitive, is not inherently ecological – it could theoretically be deployed in such a way, but could also become another vector for contemporary devastation of the natural world.

From the earliest days of computing to the internet, AI, and robotics, the digital-cognitive revolution has commanded outsized attention, what Rendueles calls a kind of "cyberfetishism".[4] The Left has had a somewhat manic-depressive relationship with this technology, oscillating between the edenic naivety of the 1990s and present-day doomerism. Without a doubt, the fears that it raises in 2026 are justified by trends such as technofeudalism, surveillance capitalism, and tech's contribution to 21st-century fascism. But these productive forces are also subjects to be debated. As authors like Aaron Bastani and Paul Cockshott have highlighted, their rise could offer huge opportunities for socialist causes in terms of economic and democratic planning and streamlining workflows: a literal communist "abundance" in exchange for little to no money. However, if the material abundance of the future is to be environmentally sustainable, then free digital information will never be more than an auxiliary – only a different relationship with the earth and energy can guarantee it.

This is what the regenerative agriculture and electro-renewable revolutions enable. The former combines traditional farming knowledge with cutting-edge science, and is revealing to us that soil, far from being an inert medium, is one of the Earth's most complex ecosystems. Replacing practices that damage its structure with those that restore it can successfully maintain or even increase industrial agricultural productivity, while simultaneously restoring its fertility. It promises an encouraging evolutionary shift: to restart the Neolithic era and redirect primary biomass production towards restoring the richness of our ecosystems.

But renewables hold the key to a programme of abundance within planetary boundaries. The falling cost of photovoltaic and wind energy, as well as energy storage, is one of the most spectacular changes in economic history, and its rollout is progressing with unprecedented speed. China took 16 years to build the Three Gorges Dam, but in 2025 it installed solar panels with a similar capacity every three weeks. This energy acceleration is not limited to China. Pakistan, India, Kenya, and Vietnam demonstrate that one of the great virtues of the renewable energy revolution is that it will not be monopolistic, but distributed. This opens up a historic opportunity for autonomous development in the Global South.

This is unlike any other energy transition. In most of the world, there is currently no cheaper way to produce electricity than pointing a solar panel at the sky. More than any previous energy transition, the process closely resembles the introduction of microprocessors: a radical levelling that allowed billions of people to carry in their pockets a computer a million times more powerful than those used in the Apollo space programme.

What is happening today with solar energy and batteries is a similar evolutionary leap to the discovery of fire. To paraphrase Marx, we are on the cusp of leaving behind humanity's prehistorical era of energy production, i.e. burning things. Over the coming decades we will stop regularly burning the molecules created by photosynthesis – whether biomass or fossil fuels – that have ruled our energy systems for a million years, and will enter a new world of unimaginable efficiency and abundance. We will use the free gift of sunlight to move electrons ourselves.

The Left should focus on politically challenging the energy transition in order to harness it in the service of an ecologically rigorous and socially inclusive modernisation.

To this we can add the fact that – thanks to the superior efficiency of electricity over fossil fuels – it is both technically and economically viable for us to electrify around 70 per cent of our material processes, offering a sovereignty, security, and democratising potential that goes far beyond the hypothetical. If we can grasp this, then we already know that transforming our countries into renewable electrostates must be the number one goal of any ecosocialist programme.

Degrowth environmentalism has questioned renewable energy's ability to ensure a future of abundance through various arguments. The purely technological ones made some sense 15 or 20 years ago, but have now been empirically disproved. Objections regarding impacts on biodiversity are valid, but experience has also shown that renewable energy can be integrated with agriculture and ecosystems. When well managed, it can even enhance biodiversity by, for instance, restoring native vegetation beneath and between solar panels. Furthermore, mineral constraints do not jeopardise the viability of the transition where it matters most: renewable generation, grids, and storage. These are not especially mineral-intensive technologies, and are recyclable. However, it is doubtful whether we could electrify every single vehicle in existence, thus replicating the existing model in an electric version. Here, the bottleneck – at least with current technology – lies with batteries, not to mention that the current model of privatising public space for the benefit of the car has disastrous social effects that ecosocialism must combat.

The energy transition will, of course, expand the mining industry, but it is worth clearing up a misconception that degrowth has helped to spread: rolling out all of the infrastructure needed for decarbonisation over the next 25 years will require fewer minerals than just one year of fossil energy. Though this figure may seem surprising, it has a simple explanation: fossil fuel extraction produces outputs that are continuously burned. Once extracted and processed, metal minerals remain incorporated in the system's capital as products with a long useful life, and they can also be recycled.[5]

New mines will undoubtedly open as a result of the green transition, and these processes may, depending on how they are handled politically, be violent and extractivist. But they could also be beneficial. The key lies in challenging them. The same happens with new renewables: if deployed under a capitalist logic, renewables in many areas exacerbate wealth accumulation via dispossession in the name of green progress, and provoke legitimate resistance.

But the ecosocialist's job cannot be to simply question the widespread rollout of renewables, because this, however inadvertently, places them on the side of the fossil fuel industry. Instead, the Left should

focus on politically challenging the energy transition in order to harness it in the service of an ecologically rigorous and socially inclusive modernisation. We can adopt the same kind of proactive, modernising political shift when it comes to issues relating to extractivism. Rather than flatly rejecting extractive processes when they could work against the fossil-fuel model, the ecosocialist left could approach them from the perspective of a new form of popular development. This would place the recovery of material sovereignty on the agenda, but take it beyond classical resource nationalism through strict conditions on investor access linked to technology transfer, cooperative trade frameworks, and the development of endogenous industrial policies.

Our generational mission is to harness capital so that, within 25 years, we can decarbonise the world, fully electrify the global productive structure, and distribute this new source of collective wealth equitably.

Ecosocialism for the masses

While new productive forces are broadening the horizons of ecosocialism with promises of newfound abundance, they do not eliminate the threat of the ecological crisis. We are faced with catastrophic shifts in the world's climate that urgently require us to slow down, while also demanding a herculean effort to adapt – one which we are failing dismally to make. We continue to wipe out species at an unprecedented rate, and to self-destructively erode vital ecosystem functions. We also continue to exceed seven of the nine planetary boundaries: in 2025 we added ocean acidification to the six already identified (climate change, erosion of biosphere integrity, land system change, excess global freshwater use, biogeochemical flows, and novel entities).

The energy and regenerative transitions are the cornerstones of an ecological transformation of industrial metabolism. They can ensure its long-term viability, but they are not the only pieces of the puzzle. We also need a genuinely circular economy, with far-reaching ramifications, ranging from a new critical mineral recycling industry to a complete redesign of all production processes, including the abolition of strategies like planned obsolescence, which exist only to maximise capitalist profit margins. We need to ingrain various forms of consumption in society, starting with transport. We must also transform practices that are not, and will never be, sustainable in any conceivable scenario of ecological abundance, such as consumerism, throwaway culture, and the unprecedented dominance of meat in the contemporary diet.

None of these changes is easily compatible with neoliberal capitalism – even less so if we also aspire, as the Left should, to an ecological transition that is swift and just. These two features can only come in tandem. If the transition is not just, it cannot be quick, because grassroots opposition will hamper any changes. The reverse is also true; if it is not quick enough, it will be unjust for those most exposed to climate chaos, and for future generations who would be undeservingly condemned to a life of crushingly hostile conditions.

While renewable energy's new competitive advantage has opened up a profitable niche that capital is already readily exploiting – ushering in a new frontier of accumulation, with all the social upheaval that this entails – ecosocialism's work cannot consist of holding back this technological change. On the contrary, we must accelerate it through public control, and place it in the service of the common good.

Our generational mission is to harness capital so that, within 25 years, we can decarbonise the world, fully electrify the global productive structure, and distribute this new source of collective wealth equitably. Although this may sound provocative, in this historical context of resurgent imperialism, with petrocapitalism morphing into fossil-fuelled fascism in petrostates (such as the US) that dictate the world order, green capitalism is not our main enemy. What is private today can be socialised tomorrow, but a "Hothouse Earth" scenario is irreversible: it would be an anthropological failure, one that would make life extremely harsh for countless future generations of humankind.

The chance to reconcile future abundance with planetary boundaries is perhaps the best news of the century.

Abundance within planetary limits is not some new, technologically enabled time extension that will allow us to continue the same ecocidal patterns that have made the Anthropocene an evolutionary dead-end. It does, however, offer a chance to radically transform our socio-natural relationship with political agendas that could – in contrast to the self-containment of Malthusian environmentalism – lead to a scientifically founded horizon of sustainability that actually appeals to the average person. This is ultimately why it is worth politically exploring the idea of abundance within planetary limits: it offers tangible benefits for political action. Climate action "for the people" will not result from an ontological shift or the moral equivalent of religious conversion; we will build it by challenging the "common sense" of our current anthropological moment, with all its fears, hopes, illusions, expectations, and politically calculated rules.

In a way, the chance to reconcile future abundance with planetary boundaries – thanks to the possibilities offered by an ecosocialist harnessing of new green productive forces – is perhaps the best news of the century. Despite an entrenched (and more than reasonable) sense of catastrophic doubt, we know today that a destabilised climate and biosphere have not, in historical terms, brought to an end what Marx taught us to call the Realm of Freedom. And if there has ever been a goal that works in our favour – one capable of uniting vast numbers of people and forging the sort of collective spirit needed to weather the many trials and tribulations along the way – it is this.

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