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For the Symposium on Degrowth in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*

Capitalism, Democracy, and the De-growth Horizon

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Abstract:

This paper engages with the work of Giorgos Kallis in order to contribute to a dialogue between the de-growth perspective and Marxist approaches on the sources and possible solutions to the ongoing ecological crisis of capitalism. While I agree with the general critique that the de-growth movement has raised not only against the consequences of growth but also the idea of growth itself, I argue that the root causes of the socially and ecologically destructive character of capitalism is not to be found in growth, but in capitalist accumulation. I present my reading of three of Marx's most important contributions to our understanding of capitalism in order to argue for an understanding that puts the emphasis on the separation of the labourers from the means of production, alienated labour, the imperative and the dynamic of competition, and the limited nature of liberal democracy. From this perspective, I argue that growth could be greened in a post-capitalist society if the institutions and dynamics that force capitalist accumulation and competition were abolished and full democracy was established. The paper ends with a description of how the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) managed to unevenly and contradictorily challenge and subvert some of the social institutions and dynamics that sustain capitalist accumulation.

Keywords: Marx, capitalist accumulation, competition, control of the means of production, de-commodification

"He preferido hablar de cosas imposibles, porque de lo posible se sabe demasiado..."

(I have preferred to talk about impossible things, because we already know too much of what is possible).

From the song "Resumen de noticias"

Silvio Rodriguez, Cuban song-writer and singer.

I have always found it strange to read intervention about "transition to socialism" published around the late 1970s and I have always consciously decided to keep away from academic discussion about what our world "should" look like. Not because I think they are not important, but mainly because I think we are so far away from breaking the neoliberal hegemony, the power of capital, and the right-wing pseudo-nationalist rhetoric that thinking of transcending capitalism appears unfortunately to be an exercise in pure speculation. But the global ecological crisis, which will be accelerated by the current economic crisis, obliges us to seriously think about transcending capitalism and identifying the institutions that should be challenged, as well as the strategies that could bring us closer to this goal. Hence, following Silvio Rodriguez, I will try to contribute to the discussion on what seems impossible, a post-capitalist world. I will focus my intervention on how we can bridge the gap between the de-growth perspective and a Marxian approach to the roots of the ongoing ecological crisis of capitalism. I will do this by first pointing to three of Marx's most important contributions to our understanding of capitalism and liberal

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representative democracy: his attack on the class character of the foundations of classical

political economy, his views of the alienating aspects of capitalism, and his critique of liberal democracy and defence of radical working class democracy. Secondly, I will use my understanding of these contributions to address the strengths and shortcomings of the de-growth perspective, especially through the work of Giorgos Kallis. I will conclude with some examples of how Latin American peasant movements, namely the Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil and the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, have challenged key institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy to build (imperfect and contradictory) alternatives to it, which often only partly respond to their aspirations. My general argument is one for analytical specificity, the importance of the political, and fundamentally for radical working class democracy, as the root to any post-capitalist society.

The Many Marxs or the Many Marxisms?

I would like to begin with a half-joke. A Brazilian friend of mine, political ecologist Carlos Walter Ponto-Gonçalves, told me once: "If someone tells you that he is a Marxist economist, be suspicious: he probably doesn't know anything about economics and he certainly doesn't understand what Marxism is". Beside the punt to economics, which self-represents itself as above all other social sciences, the joke is meant to remind us that Marx proposed a "*critique of political economy*". His goal, which inspires all of his major writings, was not to discover the immutable laws of capitalism, but to uncover and denounce the POLITICAL and CLASS character of political economy (today called economics) that pretended to understand and explain the functioning of the market. The problem however is that many Marxists have read (and continue to read) Marx as a scholar preoccupied with identifying the immanent laws of motions of capitalism. My reading of Marx is different and is closer to what Kallis mentions in his article to the effect that Marx did not discover laws, but simply pointed to tendencies (Kallis, 2015a). Marx (as many others did after him) underlined the very particular and radical nature of capitalism in comparison to previous types of societies. Capitalism is radically different because it is the first society that separates the producers from the means of production and triggers a market-dependence among producers and capitalists. Among capitalists, market-dependence generates a compulsion to compete and a constant and endless need for capital accumulation, because they have to reinvest part of their capital in the improvement of the productive process to keep their competitive edge over other capitalists. Of course, this has dramatic effects on the lives of workers and the cycles of nature. Marx captured this in a famous passage on modern industrial agriculture in volume one of *Capital*:

"In agriculture, as in manufacture, the capitalist transformation of the process of production also appears as the martyrology of the producer, the instrument of labour appear as a means of enslaving, exploiting and impoverishing the worker (...) all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil...(1991:638)".

The exploitation of labour by capital has historically been given precedence by Marxist scholars, but following the second part of this quotation, numerous Marxist ecologists among them Bellamy-Foster, Clark and York (2010), have recovered Marx's use of the concepts of social metabolism and metabolic interaction and have developed the concept of metabolic rift. What Marxists express when they work from this concept is that capitalism by triggering the imperative of competition tends to lead to over-exploitation of labour and of nature. Hence capitalism destroys the social and natural/ecological basis upon which it stands. These tendencies sometimes appear as laws. Marx himself opened the door to being interpreted as a theorist that identifies inexorable laws, as in some of his writings he actually uses the term laws, for example in his chapter on "The Law of the Tendential Fall in the Rate of Profit" in Volume

III of *Capital* (1991). Here, it is the “structuralist Marx” that we have in front of us, but clearly an incomplete and even distorted Marx. There is another “agency-focused Marx” that is clearly visible in the *Communist Manifesto* for whom history is the history of class struggle. This Marx tells us that the actual particular forms that these “laws” take within capitalism (i.e. the market-dependence, the competitive dynamic or the types of state intervention) are the result of the balance of class forces within a society that develops historically in a particular way. Let’s not forget that Marx called his approach HISTORICAL MATERIALISM. To be honest though there isn’t two Marx. He is actually never either a structuralist or a purely agency-focused theorist. He understood agency and structure in a dialectical fashion.

Marx is also not a “structuralist” because he would supposedly privilege the “economic base” (or structure) over the “political and ideological superstructure”, as if one precedes and determines the other, or as if the latter is simply a fantastic veneer on the real concrete relations of exploitation that happen in the former. Marxists that read Marx in this way often quote the following passage of Marx’s *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations of production, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness... It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of certain stage of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or —this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms— with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. These changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure (Marx, 1992: 425-426).”

What is disturbing about the *Preface to a Contribution* is that it is not representative of Marx thinking. The attractive aspect of it though is that it is about 5 pages long, compared to the several hundred pages of the different volumes of *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, and other of his major texts. Because of this it has been a key text for readers to approach this colossal thinker. More problematic is that according to Prinz the *Preface to a Contribution* was mainly intended to avoid the Prussian censorship. That is why Marx wrote it in the way that he did (without any reference to term class and presenting social change in rather abstract and apolitical manner). Marx never refers to this metaphor elsewhere, neither in the *Grundrisse* nor *Capital*. Marx’s thinking, from his early writings like the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* all the way to the three volumes of *Capital* is never organised under the so-called “base-superstructure” metaphor¹. Neither is his understanding of history driven by a kind of economic or technological determinism nor his understanding of the human experience separated in distinctive spheres of activities. Humans do not experience an “objective reality”, say the forces of production or nature, and then make sense of it through a “subjective or scientific reconstruction/critique”. Humans interact with each other and with nature simultaneously through their physical (material) experience of it and their interpretation of this experience through the meanings that they give to these material

¹ For a critique of the base/superstructure model see Wood, 1995: chap. 2; for an explanation of the erroneous interpretation of Marx’s intentions in establishing this distinction between economic base (productive forces) and superstructure (legal and political institutions) in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* see Prinz, 1969.

interactions. Humans are also not subjected to laws of economic development but take decisions under particular historic and social contexts and circumstances that inform and constrain their decisions and strategies.

In my view a Marxian-inspired approach to the current ecological crisis of capitalism should not rely on inexorable laws, universally applicable models, universal understanding of human rationality, or a predictable trajectory of the development of capitalism. Marx highlighted the social implications of the establishment of certain institutions and the development of certain dynamics peculiar to capitalism on the agency of different subjects. But his approach also highlights that the form that these take in a given society (and even if they develop fully or not) will be context-specific and determined by class/political struggles. Hence we would gain a lot from moving away from too generic formulations about human beings or capitalism toward specific formulations about the actually existing capitalism(s) in particular social formations. But we would also gain a lot from distinguishing how the capitalist society is different from other types of society. That is why capital accumulation more than growth or throughput is the category that Marxists have used when they seek to understand the logic of capitalism. Because when we compare capitalist societies with other types of societies (historically precedent or possible in the future) we underestimate its uniqueness, which transforms human rationality, relations between humans and between humans and nature, through complex reorganisation of locally and culturally-specific social and institutional orders. One of Marx's most interesting contributions was to show how ideological and a-historical the laws, categories and assumptions used by classical political economists were. He criticised them for projecting their assumptions about the bourgeois/capitalist individual into the past by presenting them as pertaining to "human nature". In contrast, Marx highlighted that human rationality responded, created and shaped its historical and environmental context. Hence, we should seriously approach capitalist rationality (profit maximisation, competition, etc.) as being HISTORIC and CONTEXT SPECIFIC, and as such subjected to social struggles. As difficult or impossible as it appears today in the twenty-first century, market rationality is not something that exists in all human societies and it cannot be assumed that it will continue to be the dominant form of rationality in the future. In his studies of pre-capitalist relations and non-Western societies —specifically in the *Grundrisse* (1993) or volume 3 of *Capital* (1991) — Marx underlined how different they were from Western capitalist societies.

The second important contribution of Marx that I want to point to is his virulent critique of the consequences for humans and for the relationships between humans and nature of the establishment of private property of the means of production, which he developed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (1992) and then repeated under different forms throughout his life. For Marx, what distinguishes human beings is their creative power that they actualise when they apply their labour to transforming nature, creating and perfecting goods, or performing an activity that satisfies their needs. Human beings can realise their creative power when they are in control of the means of production because under this circumstance the process of producing things (time spent, effort applied, technology used, etc.) is decided by them and the final product of their labour is their own. Simply put, the control of the means of production means the control over their lives. This is completely turned upside down when the means of production are privatised and the great majority of labourers are separated from the means of production. From then on they become simple sellers of labour power and a process of alienation from their creative nature and from nature itself begins. They no longer have control over how their labour is used (the labour process); the final products of their labour (commodities) are not theirs but those of the owners of the means of production (capitalists); competition among labourers to be employed workers alienates them from each other; as they perform alienated labour — i.e. a form of labour that does not allow them to unleash their

creative potential and control the process of production — they further distance themselves from nature. Nature is increasingly objectified and they have no way of transforming it, creating it, as they would want. The important point in Marx's idea of alienated labour is that the labourer's individual or collective control of the means of production is what allows autonomous decision on what to produce, when to produce it, how to produce it and for what purpose. It is also what allows labourers to decide the balance between production and leisure. The control over their labour potentially makes labourers more conscious of the totality of relations and processes (including ecological ones) that are involved in the act of producing. The establishment of private property over the means of production triggers a set of dynamics that de-humanise labourers who are turned into a simple "instruments of production" not required to understand the whole production process and even less the social and environmental ramifications of it. The power to decide over how to deal with these by way of taking decision over the production process is transferred to a small minority, those who own the means of production, i.e. the capitalists who are preoccupied above all with reaching certain levels of profits. On the flip side, the decisions that labourers are able to take "as consumers" is seriously constrained by the fact that their separation from their means of production and subsistence makes them solely dependent on their wages and the market for their social reproduction.

This is where Marx's third contribution that I want to highlight, his critique of liberal bourgeois democracy, becomes important. Time and time again Marx alluded to the formal separation of the economic from the political. By referring to this FORMAL SEPARATION, Marx wanted to point out to the fact that under a capitalist society the dominant classes present (private) economic matters as if they are separated from (public) political one. For him, the precondition for this illusion began with the establishment of private property of the means of production, i.e. the so-called primitive accumulation. This illusion was then reinforced by the relentless Bourgeois defence of private property through its codification into laws and the naturalisation of bourgeois culture within political economy. Ellen Wood's book *Democracy against the Market* (1995) is probably the book that most clearly shows the importance of this contribution and develops a framework to critically explore the relationship between "the political" and "the economic" within capitalism in contrast to pre-capitalist societies. The book also examines the way plebeian understandings and forms of democracy have been successfully subverted by bourgeois interests, particularly by systematically impeding that political democratic preoccupations about equality and social justice coming from the plebe encroach on the individualistic understanding of the means of production as the private property of the bourgeois². Wood traces back the political practices existing in Ancient Athens and highlights that democratic rights and practices were fundamentally different from those of Liberal representative democracy. One major limitation to the democratic rights of the general population in Ancient Athens was of course the exclusion of women, slaves and foreigners from citizenship. But a radically democratic feature was the inclusion of the propertyless men within the polity on an equal footing to the propertied men. Furthermore, and this is a crucial difference with liberal democracy, in Ancient Athens economic matters such as prices, rents, etc. were subjected to intense political debate, which placed limits on what the propertied class could or could not do with their property. Beyond Athenian democracy, there are plenty of historical and contemporary examples of societies or communities across our planet putting moral and political limits on "economic" relations, which they do not see as operating under a different or separate logic than other human relations. Karl Polanyi's work (1968) and the research of countless anthropologists have shown how pre-capitalist societies use cultural norms and institutions to

²This formal separation of the economic from the political is paralleled within bourgeois society by the division between the private and the public, which as feminists scholars have highlighted enforces and disciplines certain gender roles and hierarchies.

constrain economic practices. In Latin America for instance, especially in territories that remain under the relative control of the indigenous populations, certain cultural practices of reciprocity, solidarity and redistribution intended to limit social differentiation within communities have subsisted, though they have sometimes been modified or even subverted by capitalist relations. These practices are often recovered or re-invented in times of crisis to provide more survival options to marginalised groups, often even against groups within their own communities who have managed to take advantage of these practices for their private advantage.

Is Growth the Problem or Capitalist Capital Accumulation?

For me what the degrowth movement has been arguing is politically the same thing that Marxist political ecologists, like Bellamy Foster and others, argue when they say that we are on the verge of a Great Transition, in which values of “consumerism, individualism, and domination of nature” will be replaced with “a new triad: quality of life, human solidarity, and ecological sensibility” (Bellamy-Foster, 2015). An important difference is in the focus on class analysis of Marxist authors, who often see the working classes as the most affected by environmental disasters and thus as the ones with an interest in revolting against a system that is driving environmental degradation. But the gap is not difficult to bridge, as Kallis’s work in particular is strongly influenced by Martinez-Alier’s environmentalism of the poor (2009), who places particular importance on the willingness of poor people to defend nature due to their reliance on it for their livelihood. Where I think they diverge the most is in their understanding of socialism and capitalism and what drives the production of more commodities.

I partly agree and disagree with Giorgos Kallis’ main argument about growth. I agree that we have to get rid of our obsession with growth, especially because we have to seriously and definitively move from a quantitative to a qualitative approach to “development” or “quality of life”. I am totally in agreement with Kallis’ call for the need for eco-socialists to abandon the idea of growth, and the traditional productivist view attached to it that leads many to say that the problem is not production of goods and services but its unequal distribution (Kallis and March, 2015). Unequal distribution is a major problem, but we have to recognise, as Kallis highlights, that there are major issues with the way production and consumption are organised in capitalist societies, notably with the dependence of capitalism on low entropy fossil energy and its inability to sustainably manage waste (Kallis, 2017, this issue). In his argumentation however, Kallis jumps from an argument about throughput (energy and material throughput) to an argument about the cost of energy and material throughput. His argument is strong on the first grounds, but weakens on the second grounds because it falls back on quantifying them instead of highlighting the social institutions and relations that lead to this situation. This leads him to argue that we have to “re-organize (ourselves) to produce and consume not only differently but also *less*, with less energy and less materials” and that this could not be done under a socialist society that *could both grow and be ecological* (Kallis, 2017). His theoretical argumentation for this impossibility is as follows:

“... there is a broad agreement that growth is the result of capital accumulation and productivity increases. Accumulation requires the saving and investment of surplus product from one period, for more production in the next. Productivity is related to the capacity to extract more and more product (and surplus) for each hour of work put in production. Surplus product means that producers consume less than what they produce (...) Increases in productivity demand that either workers are exploited more and/or that an alternative source of power and work (e.g. energy from fossil fuels) substitutes or complements human power.

We do not know of any process of economic growth that has not involved capital accumulation and exploitation of workers and/or nature. Socialists who want to defend economic growth, even a solar-based one, would have to explain how such overall growth will come about without more exploitation of one sort or another (Kallis, 2017).

Kallis, attempting to make an argument with Marxist categories, makes several important mistakes here. Capital accumulation in a capitalist society is not about surplus product (or under-consumption), but about surplus value that is possible because workers are not paid for the full reproduction of their labour power. Capitalists do not accumulate because workers consume less than what they produce. Capitalists accumulate because the wages they pay to workers do not include their social reproduction (housing, food, childcare, healthcare, etc), which is a condition for their continued existence as workers and their ability to sell labour power. To put it differently, capitalists have to bear the costs of maintaining machines in good state and running, while they get that for free from workers by paying them less than the value that their labour power generates. Capitalists pay for labour power, not for the cost of reproduction of labour power. That cost is covered by workers themselves from a portion of their salary. The accumulation of capital is thus predicated in the ability of the capitalist to increase labour productivity in the industry or profits on the market and save the money accrued from this and transform it into capital by investing it in the improvement of the means of production to be able to increase productivity or profits continuously³. Kallis is right though that this leads to further exploitation of workers and nature. But he assumes that this would be the case in any type of society where production would grow.

The second important mistake consists in the fact that Kallis' association of growth with accumulation is fundamentally grounded on how capitalism has been organised, not how previous forms of societies were structured and future one could be. In his argument, Kallis sometimes falls back on a-historical understanding of growth that projects into the past and the future dynamics that are essentially capitalist —what Marx criticised political economists of doing. Kallis however, it seems to me, does it not for ideological reasons, but more because his argument is trying to make parallels and generalisations. But there is nothing to suggest that an economy that grows in terms of production (throughput) would necessarily be based on the capitalist form of capital accumulation, because it is the separation of the labourers from their means of production and the imperative of competition between capitalists that drives capital accumulation and overproduction. Mainstream Liberal economists have often argued for the superiority of capitalism (what they call free market economy) over socialism on the basis that it is a system that does not require planning, but that functions on the free decision of its different agents. It is true that capitalism to some extent is a system without central planning per se. However, this lack of planning is one of the reasons why it is such a destructive system. Because this lack of planning also means that entrepreneurs within it act based on insufficient and incomplete information of what their competitors are doing in terms of the technology they use, how they organise and pay their labour forces, how they exploit natural resources, etc. They are however compelled to produce at certain costs, sell at certain prices, and reach certain margins of profits to be able to reach levels of profitability that will allow them to remain in the market. Regardless of the information they can get through their best “market studies”, they have also no way of knowing with certainty how much of their products they are going to be able to sell. They are only able to know what these levels really are once they have put their commodities on the market. In absence of certainty and compelled by market competition, capitalists tend to copy

³This explanation is mainly based on a rather conventional Marxist interpretation of the labour theory of value, which could be rightly criticised for not taking into consideration the fact that nature also participates in the creation of value (see Coronil, 1996: chapter 1; Leff, 2016).

leading firms, invest in technology or processes that increase productivity, re-locate section of the production process, or very often increase production, which has historically lead to falling rates of profits and over-production, which generate crisis to solve these. This dynamic is the one that Marx theorised in his chapter on “The Law of the Tendencial Fall in the Rate of Profit” in Volume III of *Capital* (1991: 349-375). The consequences for the exploitation of workers and nature are the ones that Kallis and many others condemn, but the root causes of this are not the ones that he identifies. Even though I agree with Kallis that we need to get beyond our obsession with growth, I think that the fundamental problem is not growth. The problem is the need for relentless and continuous capital accumulation that the imperative of competition triggers. It is more the lack of planning or democratic limits on private economic matters, due to the separation of the economic from the political within capitalism, and the imperative of competition that drive these exploitative and destructive tendencies within capitalism⁴. Hence, I disagree with the premise that “growth, whether socialist or otherwise, cannot be greened”. A socialist society would have to abolish CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION, the kind of accumulation that FORCES capitalists to accumulate, over-produce, over-exploit, pollute etc. because they have to save on their costs, wages, etc. A socialist society (just as pre-capitalist societies did) could grow in certain times and de-grow in others (depending on the satisfaction of needs and the available technology). Growth in a post-capitalist society could theoretically be based on a more efficient and sustainable use of energy and resources, on better and more sustainable technologies, such as agro-ecology or the intensive use of recycled materials, labour enhancing instead of saving technologies, social relations that value and facilitate sharing, solidarity, redistribution, etc. because other priorities and imperatives would orient production. It would also not be simply the level of wages that would determine the consumer choices of labourers, but ideally democratically decided and ecologically informed objectives. This might appear speculative, but it is not totally impossible if we abolish the institutions that have force enterprises to accumulate in a capitalist way. Theoretically, if we change the social institutions and relations that create a context for over-production and environmentally unsustainable production processes, there is “nothing” that would impede us from orienting research and development and innovation toward more democratic and ecologically sound practices and technologies. To be honest, there is “nothing” should really mean there is “nothing other than the power of the dominant classes” that could impede us from organising society under other social forms and relations. And this is not a small detail. Hence, I am not certain that a post-capitalist society would be as green as we would like it and need it to be. The answer to this question can only be found in the realm of the politics that we are able to enact and the class forces that we are able to build and mobilise.

Capitalism vs Socialism... or just FULL Democracy?

In a weird sense, my argument about capital accumulation being the target instead of growth re-joins Kallis’ argument that a socialist society to be socialist should be a society where accumulation would be absent (Kallis, 2017). The difference is that I am not certain that increasing the production of certain goods and services (growth) would necessarily have the same consequences in a socialist society than in a capitalist one, because the decisions around production and consumption could have completely different priorities, and more importantly

⁴The imperative of market competition should however not be reified as if it is THE law or the reality under capitalism, because competition is often (publically) invoke by corporate leaders to celebrate the innovative spirit that competition supposedly triggers, while in their daily (private) business practices they tend to block competition and seek to build monopoly positions, from which they can extract rents. In these circumstances, competition is actively avoided and imposed on weaker producers.

would not be submitted to the social imperatives that exist under capitalism. I do not believe that using real existing socialism as a proxy for socialism allows to seriously examine this issue either.

Although Kallis' justification for using real existing socialism as a proxy for what a socialist society could look like is not completely without foundations, I think that taking real existing socialism as the model is very problematic. First, because though socialist regimes were partly based on Marxism, it could easily be shown that these regimes were never truly socialist, and Marxism was never really the ideological foundation of the regime but simply a state ideology of control. Second, and more importantly using real existing socialism as a proxy limits our imagination of what socialism COULD and SHOULD be, and leads us into the productivist gaze of real existing socialism. Quoting Jean Marchais is an easy way to show the productivist bias of most Marxists (Kallis, 2015b), but does not allow us to seriously look at how socialism could be green. But from my perspective, the other much more important problem of taking real existing socialism as the model with which to compare capitalism is that it does not take the specificity of capitalism (and thus the specificity of real existing socialism in the context of the cold war, arms race, etc) seriously. What led the USSR to be so productivist and as destructive (if not more) of nature than capitalism? The work of Simon Clark can provide some elements of answer to this question. In his co-authored book *What about the Workers?* (1993) on the socialist mode of production in the Soviet Russia, Clark showed how what drove economic decisions was not any form of state capitalist logic. What drove economic decisions was the resources and rewards that factories and workers could get their hands on if they successfully duped planners. They often did that by understating their real productive capacity at the beginning of the five-year plan in order to be able to exceed their allocated targets by the end of the plan, and rip the bonuses collectively and individually. The whole exercise was a sort of class struggle between factory workers and party and state apparatchiks, with factory managers in the middle, over the allocation of resources, which evidently did not consider the environmental consequences or the energy used to produce the throughput as important considerations. Of course, on top of these dynamics stood the ideological considerations of the confrontation with the West and the arms race, which exacerbated the impact of this system on nature even further. Just as capitalism did, environmental consequences were 'externalised' by real existing socialism. But my point is that this was not due to a similar logic, say ever-increasing accumulation or growth, operating in both systems. The economy of real existing socialism was completely different from the capitalist economy and thus using the same categories to assess it is highly problematic. However, this should also remind us, as Kallis does in a certain way, that the 'collective' control of the means of production does not guarantee more environmentally sustainable outcomes. Reverting one element that defines capitalism (say private ownership of the means of production) and replacing it with its opposite (collective ownership) will not do the trick. But I am still not fully convinced that growth is the correct target for our critique of capitalism and our discussion of a future more sustainable society. Our discussion about a post-capitalist society should be about how we disarticulate capitalism by replacing the crucial institutions and features that make it possible: the private property of the means of production, the reproduction of alienated labour and nature, the imperative of accumulation, and the separation of the economic from the political. In sum, it should be about how we build a democracy that democratises all the aspects of life, in particular the private economic decisions that the owners of the means of production make and that affect all of us and the environment.

Control of the Means of Production, De-commodification, and Autonomy

Talking about what a post-capitalist society appears to be like talking about impossible things because a lot of the discussion is utopian and hypothetical, but also quite universal. However, there have been countless experiences of groups organising themselves under different (partly) non-capitalist relations in recent years. Two of them are Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil. From the 1990s until the mid-2000s, they were able to mobilise and politicise subaltern groups by creating “relatively autonomous communities” with their own social and political norms, their own participatory political structures, and their own uneven and contradictory combination of capitalist and non-capitalist relations of production and exchange (Vergara-Camus, 2014)⁵. Though I do not think that they should be taken as models, for the de-growth or any other movement — because in my view the peasant nature of their membership is essential to understanding their achievements and limitations — there are a few general features that are worth highlighting. What is important for our discussion here is that these movements of poor peasants have:

1. resisted the commodification of land by collectively fighting to maintain or gain control of their means of production, i.e. land;
2. combined collective defence of the access to land with basically individual/family farming (though some level of cooperation exists) mobilising mainly family labour;
3. politicised their grassroots members by establishing and maintaining self-governing participatory structures of power;
4. managed to temporarily and unevenly control a territory and remain autonomous from the state⁶ by taking on some functions of the state, such as education and conflict resolution, into their own hands;
5. understood the importance of family and community self-reliance, through a focus on food production, as an initial step (in the case of the MST) or the fundamental objective (in the case of the Zapatistas) of their development alternative;
6. attempted (not always successfully) to reproduce or integrate agro-ecological methods of farming into their green revolution influenced methods;
7. increased the political participation of women and unevenly modified the traditional gender division of labour within peasant families and communities;

However, both of these movements were already going against the current in the respective national context in the 1990s. Hence neither of them managed to become hegemonic and convince other national subaltern groups to radicalise their struggle against neoliberalism. Since the mid-2000s, these movements no longer have the political capacity they used to have, as they have lost grassroots members or have been forced to retreat because of changing national political circumstances. In the case of the MST, its alliance with the Workers Party (PT), who

⁵ For a condensed version of the argument of the book see Vergara Camus, Leandro (2015) “Taking Control: Decommodification and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Mexico and Brazil” In: Marois, Tom and Lucia Pradella, eds., *Beyond Neoliberal Development: Crisis and Alternatives*, London, Pluto Press, 169-179.

⁶ This is much more the case of the Zapatistas than of the MST. The MST was never completely autonomous from the state as it depended to a great extent on the state for the expropriation of land, and the support to the agrarian reform settlements. However, from the 1990s until the mid-2000s, when it continuously grew through the multiplication of land occupations, the MST was able to use the period of occupation (which lasted anywhere from 2 to 7 years) as a period of radical politicisation and construction of political autonomy. Grassroots members of the MST during that period had to learn how to tackle concrete challenges (food provision, security, sanitation and health, education, etc.) through participatory and self-governing bodies. Though participation tended to decrease, these practices were later reproduced in the settlements, creating an alternative structure that was able to confront, negotiate or collaborate with the state, depending on the policy. After a wave of land occupations triggered by the arrival of the Workers Party to the Presidency of Brazil in 2004, land occupations began to dramatically diminish and the existing settlements became much more reliant on the state. The cash transfer payments by the state to people living under the poverty line and the deceleration of the agrarian reform pulled the rug under the feet of the MST and dramatically reduced the numbers of families ready to embark on land occupations. Because of this, the MST lost a great deal of its dynamism.

was in government in Brazil from 2003 to 2016, produced some positive results in terms of agrarian policies to support family producers but nothing in terms of new institutions to begin to build a post-capitalist society. Moreover, PT policies, such as cash transfer payments and credits for cash crop production, changed the conditions that provided a constant influx of new militants for the MST (Vergara-Camus and Kay, 2017). Obviously, this poses important questions with respect to political strategy, coalition building, and state power. But the importance of these two very different experiences is however that they show that movements can, under certain circumstances, confront and subvert defining institutions and dynamics of capitalism. These movements have challenged the sanctity of private property of the means of production by successfully using a moral discourse that rejects the separation of the economic from the political. The members of these organisations have to a certain degree regained the control over their labour and the productive process, though many of them still need to sell their labour power outside their communities and even migrate abroad. They have partially subverted the imperative of competition by holding land under non-commodified form⁷ (though the MST settlers are under the pressure of having to repay the loans that they receive from the state). They have been able to do this by covering some of their subsistence needs (notably food, shelter, mobilisation of labour power) without depending on the market and by tapping into kinship or community solidarity and cooperation. In the case of the Zapatistas, indigenous families continued to partially rely on non-capitalist relations of production and exchange for their subsistence, such as exchange of labour for produce, barter, etc. In the case of the MST, inserted within a much more capitalist agriculture, several collective experiences such as raising pigs and chickens initially had the double objective of providing use value (meat for self-consumption) and exchange value (pork and poultry to sell on the local market), thereby decreasing the need for money of MST settlers for their social reproduction. Hence, both the Zapatistas and the MST settlers were able to be relatively autonomous from the market, though they are all inserted and participate in capitalist societies. Autonomy here does not mean that they live in autarky or in isolation from capitalism. They have simply managed to de-commodified some aspects of their social reproduction.

The ecological impact of these experiments is difficult to assess because both the Zapatistas and the MST settlers have been historically inserted in an agriculture that has been influenced by green revolution fossil-fuel dependent technology. However, the great majority of the membership of both organisations practice inter-cropping that relies substantially on peasant traditional knowledge that tends to depend on maintaining some levels of biodiversity and agro-ecological restoration. Growth in Zapatista communities does exist and it has the goal of meeting the subsistence needs of the family unit—which is subjected to demography pressure—through a combination of food and cash crop, as well as wage-earnings. Depending on the circumstances, they sometimes have to grow production by stretching the limit of the balance between agricultural production and regeneration of soil fertility as much as possible. They can do this by opening up a new area to cultivation while leaving another fallow, reducing the time they planned to leave the field lying fallow, testing organic inputs or even small amount of chemical fertiliser/herbicide/pesticide, switching the balance between food and cash crops, mobilising more unpaid family labour, selling their labour power for a wage, etc. They practice a type of environmentalism of the poor and an agro-ecology of the poor, as the lack of financial resources for farming push Zapatistas indigenous peasant to use less and less chemical inputs or replace

⁷ In Zapatista communities the *ejido* form of property that was created after the Mexican revolution of 1910-1917 is the dominant form of land tenure. In an *ejido*, land is under the custody of the community but controlled by individual families and it cannot legally be sold or used as collateral for loans. The Constitutional reform of 1992, one of the reasons of the Zapatista uprising, made privatisation possible, but several safeguards have made it difficult. In Brazil, agrarian reform settlers have usufruct rights over land for the first 10 years and are thus technically protected during that time from losing their land if they fail to generate profits.

them with organic alternatives. The case of the MST is not as clear, because many of its settlers have traditionally end up re-inserting themselves much more rapidly within capitalist industrial agriculture. However, most settlers consider important to produce food for self-consumption, tend to try to diversify their production, and some experiments with agro-ecological farming. The decade of state-supported agro-export boom presided over by the Workers Party (2003-2016) accelerated this reinsertion and did not encourage the emergence of an alternative and more sustainable model of agriculture.

These movements demonstrate that there is space for alternatives to emerge and develop within capitalism, though they are also subject to the contradictions of existing within a capitalist world, as well as the changing correlation of class forces nationally and internationally. Here I believe that the de-growth movement is among the most inspiring at the moment because it is interested in studying, generating and reflecting on the multiplicity of experiences and practices that are emerging in response to the social and ecological crisis of capitalism. It is interested in fighting against the growing commodification of life under capitalism, creating new commons, and seeking individual and collective autonomy through the re-emergence of new non-capitalist practices (Kallis, Demaria and D'Alisa, 2014). I hope to have shown that a certain reading of Marx can also be very close to de-growth perspective. If we want to build a post-capitalist society, we need to find ways to challenge private property of the means of production, de-commodify and democratise the access to and management of natural resources, challenge the separation of the economic from the political, and collectively build the political capacity of labouring classes.

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