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**Ecosocialism**

# **'Optimism of the Will': Ecosocialist Dreamin'**

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The quotation above is an expression of the long-standing traditional Iroquois philosophy that formed the basis of ‘The Great Law of the Haudenosaunee of the Iroquois Confederacy’. It expresses a fundamental view of the necessary relationship that should exist between humans and the rest of the natural world. Such a worldview was not unique to the Iroquois and is still shared by many other Native American nations and by other indigenous groups around the world.

However, the latest statistics and reports on the ever-worsening climate and ecological crises make it painfully clear that today’s generations—never mind “the next seven generations”—are not being considered by the fossil fuel giants or by the other big capitalist corporations. Or, indeed, by the governments that facilitate their Earth-destroying ‘business-as-usual’ projects. In January, the EU’s Copernicus Climate Change Service confirmed that earlier predictions—that 2023 would be the warmest year since records began—had been confirmed.

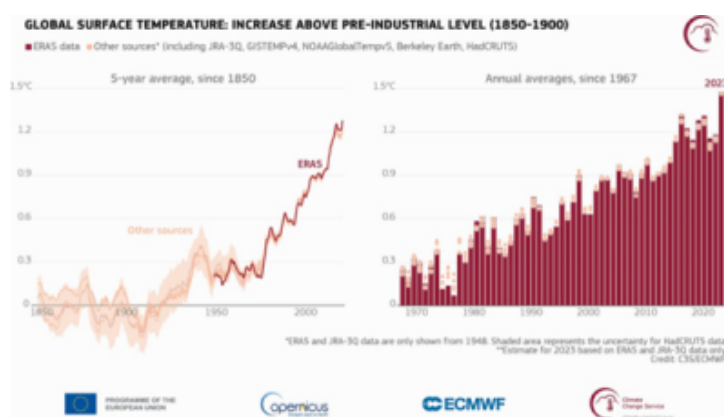


Fig. 1 - Saying ‘Goodbye’ to the Paris 2015 ‘target’ of “1.5C to Stay Alive!”

For the first time, global warming, or “global boiling,” as UN General Secretary António Guterres called it in July 2023, with the world experiencing a record number of record-breaking extreme weather events, exceeded 1.5C every day across the entire year, compared to pre-industrial levels. And this month, Copernicus reported that January was the warmest January ever, even beating January 2023—and that this February was heading towards being the warmest February ever!

In addition, the Global Tipping Points Report for 2023 warned about the increasing risks of “irreversible change” as regards both climate change and nature loss. Their Report pointed out that of the Earth’s major tipping systems, 5 were already near to crossing irreversible tipping points, and that this posed: “threats of a magnitude never faced by humanity.”

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These threats could materialise in the coming decades, and at lower levels of global warming than previously thought. They could be catastrophic, including global-scale loss of capacity to grow major staple crops. Triggering one Earth system tipping point could trigger another, causing a domino effect of accelerating and unmanageable damage. Tipping points show that the overall threat posed by the climate and ecological crisis is far more severe than is commonly understood.

Fig. 2 - Latest warnings from Global Tipping Points

If these tipping points are passed, there will be such severe damage to Earth's life-support systems that the stability of human societies will be under serious threat of collapse, something David Attenborough warned about in 2018.

Thus, it may seem perverse for the second part of this article's title to reference The Mamas & The Papas' song California Dreamin', by speaking of 'Ecosocialist Dreamin'. However, revolutionary dreams and hopes are what enable people to keep struggling for a better world. Although at present we are still a long way from seeing the global Earth-saving and Earth-healing climate and ecological strategies we need to see, ecosocialism is the approach that offers our best hope of getting out of the mess we are currently in and of ensuring that the Earth will continue to live and thrive.

## **The importance of being Gramsci**

The first part of the title, 'optimism of the will' – is the second element of a political approach the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci urged on his comrades during the 1920s and '30s, which is often summarised as: 'Pessimism of the intellect, but optimism of the will'

Gramsci had become General Secretary of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) in August 1924. By then, Mussolini had been prime minister of Italy for two years, and Fascist Party gangs had been terrorising and killing members of left wing groups for several years. However, despite Mussolini's increasingly repressive rule and despite Gramsci's pessimistic analysis of the current trends, he rejected a fatalistic cynicism and instead remained optimistic about the possibility of a radical transformation into something better. In fact, as early as March 1924, in his article 'Against Pessimism', published in the PCI journal L'Ordine Nuovo (New Order), he had warned that: "the thick, dark cloud of pessimism... oppressing the most able and responsible militants... may in fact be the greatest danger we face at present. [2] In fact, 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' soon became the motto of that journal.

There was certainly plenty to be pessimistic about when he wrote that article. By then, there were multiple crises of capitalism, in particular post-war austerity and the resultant mass poverty, and the rise of fascism. These crises were seen by many as the 'monsters' of a capitalist world order that was disintegrating but from which a new and better world was struggling—with considerable difficulty—to emerge. Gramsci described it thus: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. [3]

For Gramsci—and for many others—things were to become even worse: in November 1926, he was arrested and imprisoned, remaining a prisoner until his death in 1937. During his imprisonment, the threats posed by capitalism's 'monsters' and 'morbid symptoms' increased: the 'Great Depression', the coming to power of Hitler's Nazi Party in Germany, and increasing signs of the approach of a new world war. Nonetheless, and despite his worsening health, he maintained that 'optimism of the will'. In a 'Letter from Prison', dated December 1929, he wrote:

"I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will...Whatever the situation, I imagine the worst that could happen in order to summon up all my reserves and will power to overcome every obstacle. [4]

Today, there are still 'monsters' – those Gramsci wrote about (including the spread of 'creeping' fascism around the globe), and the new existential crises of climate change, ecological destruction, pandemics, and several nasty imperialistic wars. To many, it seems as though this 'old world is dying' too.

## Dreaming is revolutionary!

That we need to free humanity from capitalism's 'morbid symptoms', to create another, and better, world, is becoming increasingly clear to many. The urgent need for such a better world was underlined by the historian Eric Hobsbawm:

"If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness. [5]

More recently, Neil Faulkner put it thus:

"We believe that the old order is doomed and we must build a new one based on democracy, internationalism, ecosocialism, solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, and the total transformation of society to serve human need not private greed. [6]

By far the best hope for replacing today's 'old order' with a new one along the lines Neil Faulkner envisaged lies with ecosocialism. Many—even some on the left—consider such 'dreaming' of a better world impractical and unrevolutionary. Yet, in fact, such dreaming is very much 'in the spirit of Marx' and is based firmly on the possibilities seen in present-day realities. As early as the 1960s, Che Guevara argued—against his 'orthodox' communist critics—that his dreams of the possibilities for global emancipation were not divorced from the existing material circumstances and conditions of the time. Che believed: "revolutionary hope [is] necessary for revolutionary politics and practice." [7]

In fact, such hoping and dreaming are similar to what the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch termed 'Real Possible' hope, which 'begins with the seed in which what is coming is inherent.' [8] Lenin, too, stressed the importance of dreaming a concrete vision of a better future. According to him, revolutionaries 'should dream!' – even if those

dreams 'may run ahead of the natural march of events.' For him, 'If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.' [9] Thus, as Ernest Mandel argued: "hopes and dreams are... categories of revolutionary Realpolitik". [10]

For centuries, many revolutionaries like Lenin and Che have dreamed of abolishing exploitation, oppression, inequality, unfreedom, and alienation through the creation of a classless society. Then, however, it has been argued by some that material and cultural conditions had been insufficiently developed to allow such dreams to become reality. Thus, in that sense, such revolutionaries can indeed be seen as 'utopians', because their hopes were not fully based on the realities of their worlds, even though their rebellions were entirely justified as being part of the global struggle by humans against inhuman conditions. Nonetheless, those early utopians paved the way forward by developing dreams, ideals, and ways of thinking and acting that now finally make it possible to realise those hopes and dreams.

Thus, despite today's multiple crises—and the depth of many of those crises—there is more than a glimmer of hope. Because, as well as globalising its economic reach and imposing its addictive fixation on perpetual growth in GDP and profits, capitalism has also, inadvertently but inevitably, created a vast global army of the disposed and exploited and an international environmental movement, which, between them, using Marx's term, have the potential to be the 'grave-diggers' of this hugely exploitative and ecologically destructive system. As Marx observed, humanity tends to set itself:

"only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation". [11]

And the solution that has by far the best potential for solving those multiple crises is... ecosocialism.

## Reasons to be hopeful

Before the start of this century, there were not many radical or revolutionary left organisations in the UK that specifically identified as ecosocialist. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a definite shift towards more left groups embracing ecosocialism. Most recently, in 2021, an Ecosocialist Alliance was formed, in which several ecosocialist groups have been cooperating to produce joint statements in preparation for G8 and COP meetings. Most recently, 2023 saw the launch of an exciting new 'Ecosocialism Conferences' project.

While it's difficult at times to maintain hope, especially when some things are going backward rather than progressing, it is essential to maintain Gramsci's 'optimism of the will', and to dream of the real possibility of creating an ecologically sustainable and economically just world. While the first chapter may, initially, merely confirm some in their depression about the chances of altering course, the hope is that, by the end of the book, most will see that such hopes and dreams are not utopian or unrealistic. On the contrary, those hopes and dreams, along with a determination to keep on struggling, are essential 'For the Earth to Live'. In fact, if he were alive today, Ian Drury, who has been described as often being a 'voice for the disenfranchised', would (probably!) be singing that there are 'Reasons to Be Hopeful'.

It is increasingly clear to many that, with corporations, governments, and mainstream parties refusing to put climate protection before capitalist profits, the choice facing us and most of the other species on this heating-up planet is,

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quite simply, 'either ecosocialism or capitalist barbarism and extinction!' While it is necessary to fight hard for all the reforms, mitigations, and policies we can force from governments, ultimately we will have to make a decisive break with the logic of capitalism itself. As Marx would (probably!) have said if he were alive today: "People of the world unite, rise up, and ACT! You have a planet to save!"

In 2018, Greta Thunberg underlined why it is vital to step up the climate struggle when she said to older generations – on behalf of younger generations: "Please treat the climate crisis like the acute crisis it is and give us a future. Our lives are in your hands. [12] As James Connolly, the revolutionary Irish republican, said: "The powerful only appear powerful because we are on our knees. Let us rise!"

There are already plenty who have refused to let 'pessimism of the intellect' defeat their 'optimism of the will', and have thus risen from their knees to fight for current and future generations, including many thousands acting with Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, to name but two organizations. So let's come together and 'Unite to Survive!'

Finally, for those still struggling with maintaining hope, perhaps these words from the late and great Seamus Heaney will help tip the balance the right way:

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme. [13]

Source: [AntiCapitalist Resistance](#)

PS:

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[1] <https://7genfoundation.org/7th-generation/>

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1924/03/pessimism.htm>

[3] Antonio Gramsci, 1971, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, London, Lawrence & Wishart, p.276

[4] <https://www.centreforoptimism.com/Pessimism-of-the-Intellect-Optimism-of-the-Will>

[5] Eric Hobsbawm, 1994, Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991, London, Michael Joseph.

[6] Neil Faulkner, et al., 2021, System Crash: An activist guide to making revolution, London, Resistance Books, p.120.

[7] Allan Todd, 2024, Che Guevara: The Romantic Revolutionary, Barnsley, Pen & Sword, p.222

[8] Ernst Bloch, E., 1995, The Principle of Hope, Vol. 1, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, p. 238.

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[9] Vladimir I. Lenin, 1902, 'What is to be done?', in Lenin: Selected Works, Vol. 1, 1975, Moscow, Progress Publishers, pp.225-6

[10] Ernest Mandel, 1978, 'We Must Dream', in de Jong, A., ed., 2022, Ernest Mandel: Hope and Marxism, p.124

[11] Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, 1967, The Communist Manifesto, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, p.94; Karl Marx, 1859, 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in Karl Marx, 1975, Early Writings, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, p.426

[12] Greta Thunberg, No One is Too Small to Make a Difference, 2019, p.5

[13] Heaney, S., 1990, The Cure at Troy: Sophocles' Philoctetes, London, Faber & Faber, p.69