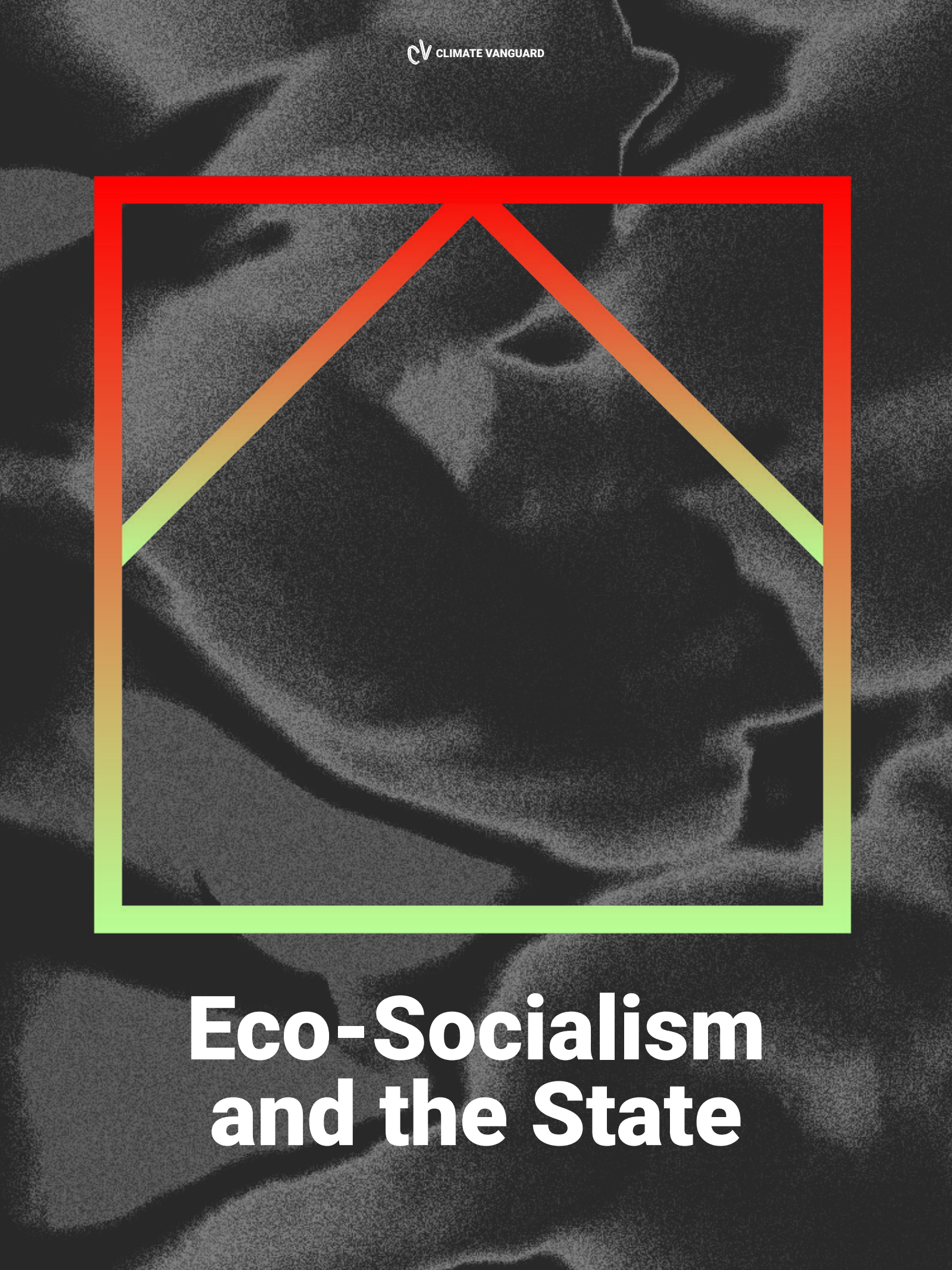
CLIMATE VANGUARD



Eco-Socialism and the State

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About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led organisation empowering youth movements through radical political education.

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Introduction

Eco-socialism carries the "double objective" of meeting human needs and regenerating the planet.[1,a] It achieves this by supplanting the systems that are driving compounding crises – capitalism and imperialism – with a new society grounded in human and non-human flourishing.

In part one of this three-part series on eco-socialist transition, we examine the importance of state power to realising eco-socialism.[b] We begin by examining what 'the state' is, its role in class society, and five key institutions of capitalist states. We then put forward a vision of the eco-socialist state, including its defining capacities and characteristics. Finally, we critically appraise two other leftwing political approaches' orientation to the state.

What Is 'The State'?

The state is the ultimate guarantor of class society. It provides the necessary "order" to prevent competing classes from "[consuming] themselves and society in fruitless struggle," and thus, ensures the enduring power of one class (i.e. the ruling class) over others.[2]

What is class?

Class is the relationship that different groups of people have to the means of production – the things required to produce goods and services (e.g. land, tools, and machinery). For example, under feudalism, there were two primary classes: serfs and lords. Serfs possessed their own land, but all surplus was expropriated by the lord.

a In this brief, the term 'eco-socialism' is used to describe both a process and a goal. Eco-socialism refers to a qualitatively different society compared to capitalism and imperialism, but realising this new world involves a protracted process of transition.

b Parts two and three of this series focus on the role of the revolutionary party in the struggle for eco-socialism and eco-socialist strategy, respectively.

Under capitalism, the current dominant mode of production, the two primary classes are the working class and the capitalist class. In order to access the things necessary for survival (e.g. food, water, energy etc.), the working class is forced to sell its labour-power (i.e. the capacity to work) to the capitalist class, which maintains private ownership of the means of production.

Under capitalism, the state reproduces capitalist rule by both *repressing dissent* and seeding *ideological consent*.[3] It does this through traditional state institutions, like the government, as well as institutions traditionally considered outside of the state, like the media.[c] Let's look at five primary state institutions.

1. Government

In capitalist democracies, voters get to choose between different parties, which tend to be some combination of far-right, conservative, liberal, or social-democratic.[4] This is presented as an ideological choice between diametric opposites.[5] Indeed, these parties do have real disagreements, for instance, on trade policy or transgender rights.

However, most of these parties share a fundamental commitment to maintaining capitalism and imperialism.[6,d] Any disagreements are consigned to the question of how to best manage these systems, not whether they should exist.[7]

A recent example is the 2024 UK general election, in which the Labour Party campaigned on the election slogan of "change." But this did not mean systemic change away from capitalism, as now-Chancellor Rachel

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c Antonio Gramsci called this the "integral state," which is composed of "political society" (i.e. traditional state institutions) and "civil society" (e.g. education, media, the family) (Gramsci, 1971).

d Parties that do look beyond capitalism (i.e genuinely socialist or communist parties) often contest elections too. However, throughout history, when these parties became too powerful for capital's liking, domestic elites collaborated with international imperial forces to exclude them from government (e.g. Communist Party of Italy in the 1948 elections) (Miller, 1983). Today, leftwing parties, especially in the Global North, operate on the margins of political relevance. See part two of this brief series for a deeper exploration of the history of leftwing parties.

Reeves made clear: “this Labour Party sees profit as not something to be disdained but of business succeeding.”[8,e]

Similarly, in the 2024 presidential election, voters were presented with a supposed choice between ‘total opposites’ — Kamala Harris and Donald Trump — despite both representing continuity in US imperial power and support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza.[9]



Image 1: From left to right, former US Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. USA Today Sports/Reuters.

This illusion of choice between competing parties leads working-class people to believe that they possess political power, while in practice, their participation legitimises and reproduces their own oppression.

2. Civil Service

The civil service is composed of permanent state employees who perform administrative functions but, generally, are not elected or politically appointed. Tasked with ‘politically neutral’ public administration in the interest of the ‘national interest,’ the civil service is ultimately responsible for facilitating profits for the ruling class.[10]

e The Chancellor of the Exchequer is the British equivalent of the treasury secretary in the US or finance minister in many other countries.

For example, the UK's *Directory of Civil Service Guidance* states that "national interest requires that there should be some continuity of policy."[11] In other words, the civil service is expected to keep government policy stable over time, especially in the area of "foreign policy."[12] In the case of the UK's relations with Israel, this commitment to "continuity" in the "national interest" amounts to the perpetuation of genocidal settler colonialism.[13]

If an incoming government did threaten the 'national interest,' then the civil service would actively resist it. Indeed, before the 2019 UK general election an anonymous civil servant wrote: "I work in the civil service – and it will resist a Corbyn government."[14]

3. Police and Military

The state claims a monopoly on the 'legitimate' use of force. This is embodied in the function of both the police and the military. They are the ultimate expression of the state's repressive power, one that emerges from the shadows whenever people's consent to capitalism begins to break down.[15]



Image 2: Metropolitan Police officers in circa 1870. BBC.

The primary role of the police is not to protect people, but to defend the institution of private property and suppress any political movements that threaten it.[16] This was just as true of the London Metropolitan Police when it was formed in 1829 to crush labour strikes, as it was of the Chicago Police Department, which, under the direction of the FBI, assassinated Illinois Black Panther Party Chairman Fred Hampton in 1969.[17] More recently, police forces across the Global North have fired tear gas and rubber bullets on student protests for a free Palestine.[18]

Similarly, the primary role of Global North militaries is not to protect their citizens from 'foreign danger,' but to defend imperialist interests. A classic example is the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This war of aggression

was waged under the false pretence that Saddam Hussein was planning to deploy weapons of mass destruction, providing cover for the US' real motivation of seizing Iraq's vast oil reserves and forging another client state in West Asia.[19]

4. Education

The education system widens people's access to knowledge, critical thinking, and culture. Yet, even as it represents one of the more solidaristic elements of the capitalist state, alongside healthcare, social security, and public housing, it also serves to reproduce mass consent for the capitalist system.[20]

Curricula are designed within clear ideological guardrails. For example, in history class, we are taught that it was primarily the Western Allies that saved Europe from fascism, ignoring the fact that it was the Soviet Union that took out 80% of the Nazi *Wehrmacht*.[21] Meanwhile, economics students are propagandised into believing that capitalism is the only way to structure economic life, with socialism conveniently air-brushed out of history.

Furthermore, students are disciplined into "good behaviour," which equates to wearing particular clothes, speaking only at particular times, strictly obeying authority, and adopting a generally docile demeanour.[22] This prepares them for a life of work in which they're expected to submit themselves to the boss.[23]

5. Media

In capitalist societies, the media is considered an independent voice that educates and informs people. This dovetails with liberal democracies' apparent commitment to 'freedom of speech,' often considered the cornerstone of a 'true democracy.' In reality, most media is not a guardian of truth, but the mouthpiece of the ruling class.

As an overwhelmingly for-profit industry, the media is owned by capitalists who use it to maintain their own class dominance.[24] Although

this power dynamic is often concealed behind ideologically engineered headlines, it sometimes spills out into the open.

For example, in February 2025, centi-billionaire Jeff Bezos released an extraordinary statement in which he said that *The Washington Post*, which he owns, would only publish opinion articles that support "personal liberties" and "free markets." [25] In other words, opinion articles that provide an uncompromising defense of capitalism.

Public broadcasters are not much better. For example, 101 staff members recently accused the BBC of pro-Zionist bias in its coverage of the genocide in Gaza.[26]

The Eco-Socialist State

The capitalist state is, by definition, opposed to eco-socialist transition. As we've demonstrated, it uses coercion and consent to protect the capitalist system and those who run it.

However, this does not mean that the state itself is a barrier to eco-socialism. In fact, the state is *essential* to building eco-socialism. The state cannot be ignored, but rather it must be *contested* and ultimately *captured*.[27]

Below, we outline the unique capacities of an eco-socialist state and how its characteristics differ from a capitalist state.

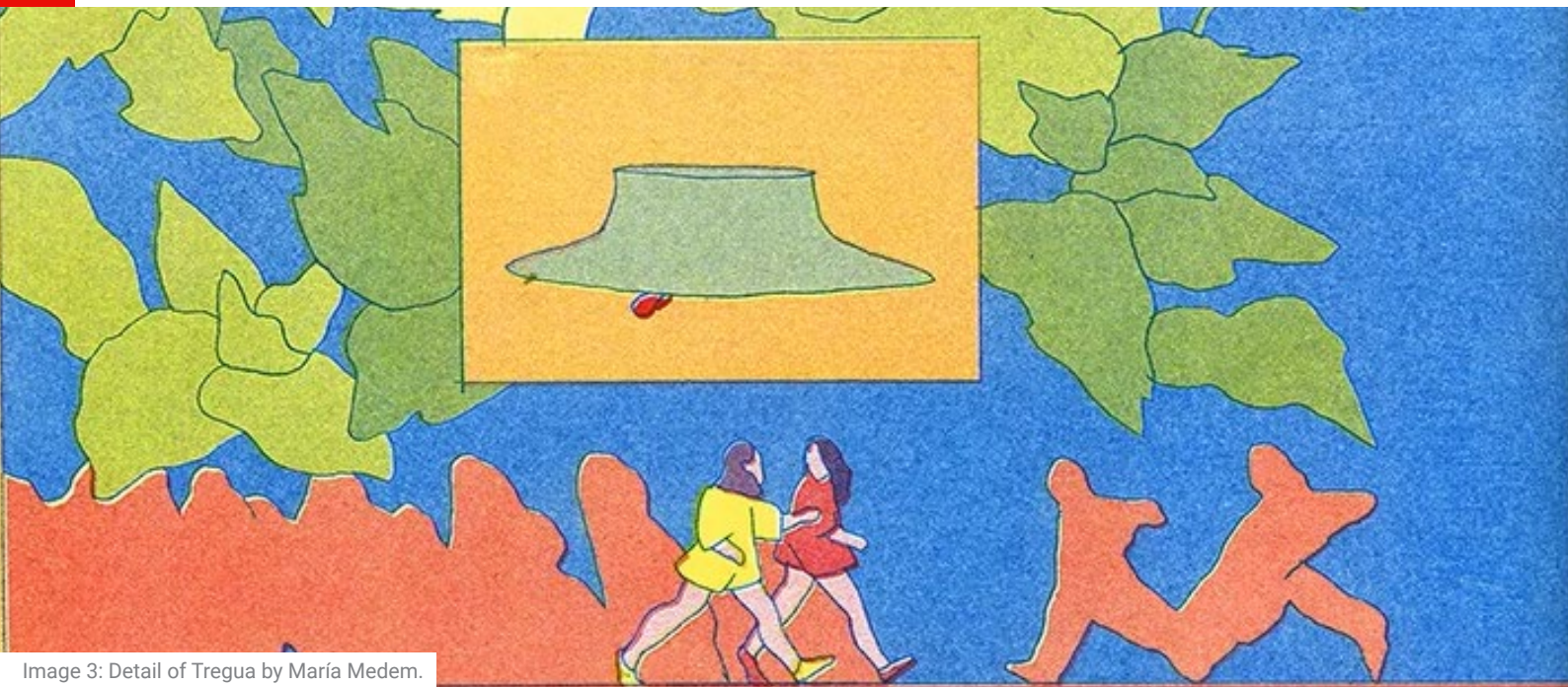


Image 3: Detail of Tregua by María Medem.

Capacities of the Eco-Socialist State

1. Scale

The state is uniquely positioned to coordinate an eco-socialist transition. It alone has the ability to assume immediate control of the economy by nationalising key sectors and democratically planning production.

This is not just a *quantitative* question of expanding certain industries (e.g. healthcare, renewable energy, housing) and reducing others (e.g. arms, prisons, private jets).[28] Rather, eco-socialist transition also entails a *qualitative* transformation in the way people relate to production and society.[29] The scale and complexity of this challenge cannot be over-stated.

Let's take the example of transport. First, the transport needs of an entire population would have to be mapped and distilled into a granular plan of action that simultaneously addresses urgent ecological issues.

Next, masses of workers would have to be re-trained, upskilled, and mobilised in building eco-socialist infrastructure. This includes ramping up the production of electric bikes and buses; light and high-speed rail; retro-fitted ports and bridges, as well as changing the way people live, like locating work closer to people's homes and reducing long distance trade flows.[30]

But transport is just one section of the economy. This process would have to occur simultaneously in other domestic sectors like energy and agriculture. Global eco-socialist transition would require additional internationalist coordination with the South, which has had its productive capacity forcibly under-developed through centuries of imperialism.[31] Northern states could help facilitate this process through demilitarisation, reparations, and technology transfer.[32]

Without the eco-socialist state, the global coordination of human capacity, scientific acumen, technical expertise, and political will necessary to build another world, in the time remaining to avert catastrophic ecological breakdown, is simply impossible.

2. Defense

The state has the capacity to defend eco-socialist gains from domestic counter-revolution and imperialist encirclement. History bears testament to this reality.



Image 4: Leon Trotsky, head of the Soviet Red Army, and Red Guards during the Russian Civil War. HistoryMaps.

After the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, Tsarist forces recruited 16 imperialist powers to invade the fledgling worker's state.[33] Winston Churchill, who sent British soldiers to support the anti-communist crusade, famously said that "Bolshevism must be strangled in its cradle." The Soviet Union defeated this imperialist encirclement through the superior organisation of the Red Army and the wartime transformation of the economy (often known as "war communism").[34]

In 1961, the US launched the Bay of Pigs Invasion, which aimed to depose Fidel Castro and topple the revolutionary Cuban government. Cuba orchestrated "first defeat of imperialism in America" through sophisticated military planning and the organisation of popular militias.[35] The Cuban state and its socialist project has survived 70 years of brutal blockade due to the ingenuity of state planning under siege and the enduring revolutionary resilience of the Cuban people.[36]

Since 1999, Venezuela has protected the Bolivarian process from constant derailment attempts by the US, including decades of crippling sanctions and coup attempts.[37] Although the US recently abducted President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores, the Bolivarian government is still intact and poised to combat a full-scale invasion through the "civic-military union" of the armed forces and communal militias.[38]

Today, any eco-socialist project would face the full brunt of global counter-revolution, especially as the US resorts to hyper-imperialist military aggression.[39] The state is a necessary force to beat back reactionary forces and advance the eco-socialist process.

Characteristics of the Eco-Socialist State

1. Democratic

Unlike the capitalist state, which is defined by minoritarian class rule, the eco-socialist state is premised on a radical expansion of political, economic, and social freedoms.

First, officials at all levels of the eco-socialist state are elected on a term-limited basis, subject to recall, and paid the average annual income in their country.[40,f] Unlike the capitalist state, there would be no corporate politicians or unaccountable bureaucracy.

Second, the eco-socialist state plans production according to human and ecological needs, as opposed to facilitating the private accumulation of capital. Centralised planning from below is complemented by diverse forms of ownership, including state-owned enterprises, workers' cooperatives, and people's communes.[41]

Third, and perhaps most importantly, everyone's basic material needs would be guaranteed by the eco-socialist state. Under capitalism, people may have the freedom of speech, but they also have the freedom to be exploited, hungry, and homeless. In this sense, genuine freedom, including to political expression, can only be realised once people have the right to their own conditions of existence.[42]

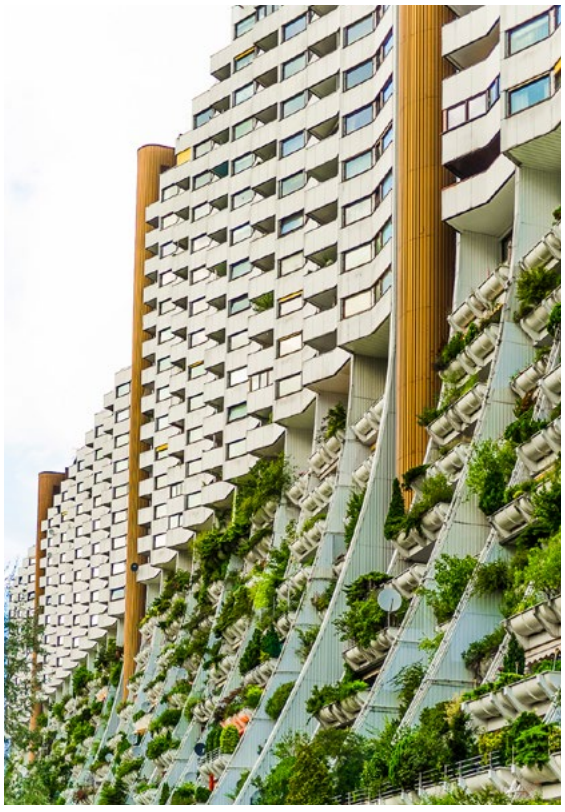


Image 5: Alterlaa (Vienna) is a housing complex designed for low-income families. Hidden Architecture.

f The stipulation around recall has long been practised in the Cuban government and the stipulation around wages is practised by the Austrian Communist Party and the Workers' Party of Belgium (Cuba Solidarity Campaign, 2005) (Kurz & Pansy, 2024) (Biver, 2024).

2. Temporary

As the eco-socialist process advances, the material basis of class society begins to erode, and with it, the state itself. This is because without class and, thus, without class domination, the state loses its purpose. As Friedrich Engels said, in the revolutionary process, "the state is not 'abolished.' It withers away."[43,g]

It is important to remember that real-existing socialist projects have not been allowed to progress to a stage where withering is possible. As we've shown, socialist states have been subject to vicious counter-revolution, with some even subject to anti-communist genocide.[44] Under these conditions, a strong state is necessary.

That being said, socialist states have experimented with communist structures. For example, Venezuela has directly incubated communes, which it views as a key institution in building the popular protagonism of the masses.[45] This can be understood as the very early stages of a withering process.



Image 6: Ángel Prado, the spokesperson of El Maizal, a socialist commune in Venezuela. Peoples Dispatch.

g In some translations, the German *"er stirbt ab"* is translated as "it dies out."

Competing Theories

Other leftwing political approaches have a different orientation to the state, either engaging with it in a reformist manner (i.e. social democracy) or refusing to engage with it at all (i.e. anarchism). Let's examine these two theories in closer detail.

1. Social Democracy

Originally, social democracy sought to gradually move society beyond capitalism, envisioning socialism through parliamentary and reformist means.[46] As a political project, it peaked in the post-WWII Global North, when progressive governments developed a range of welfare programmes in order to placate the organised left and ward off the revolutionary threat it posed.[47] Contradictions at the core of social democracy meant that it could never be a lasting project.

First, the material gains for the working class in the Global North were made possible through imperialism.[h] Losses in profits from decreased exploitation in the imperial core were recouped through super-exploitation of land and labour in the periphery of the capitalist world system.[48,i] Therefore, social democracy was a material impossibility on a global scale and its manifestation in the Global North was eventually undermined by, among other things, national liberation struggles in the South.

Second, social democracy only softened capitalist oppression without resolving its root cause: private ownership of the means of production. This meant that social democratic advances could easily be rolled back (i.e. by neoliberal governments).

Third, the implementation of social democracy contributed to the pacification of many of the same radical movements that brought it

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h To learn more about imperialism, read Climate Vanguard's brief *Defining Imperialism, Colonialism, and Neo-Colonialism.*

i Super-exploitation is a rate of exploitation above the social norm in the Global North. It depends on paying workers less than they actually need to survive, relying instead on non-market forms of social reproduction (e.g. peasant agriculture).

into existence, weakening the forces that would have been capable of defending social gains.[49]

In contemporary politics, social democracy still attempts to treat the worst symptoms of capitalism, but no longer aims to transcend it. This is the operating logic behind the well-known policies of the Northern ecological left (e.g. the Green New Deal), which aims to combine ecological and social objectives without departing from capitalist social relations or imperialist dynamics.[50]

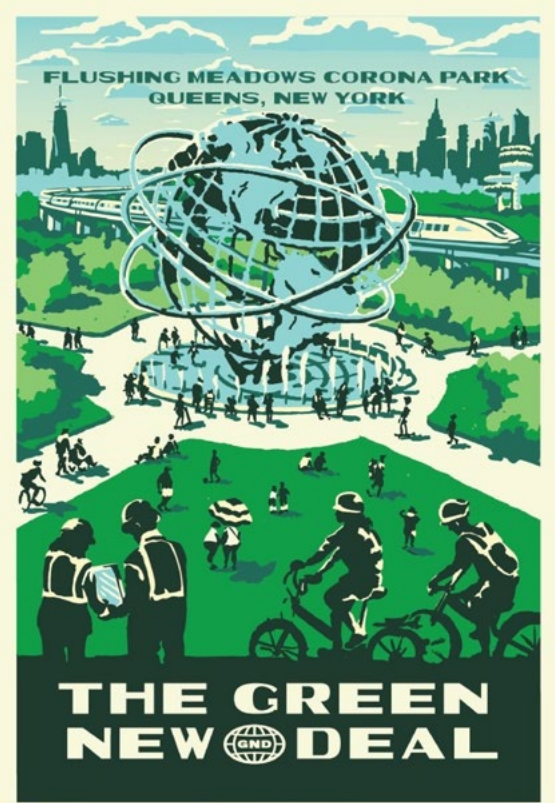


Image 7: An artistic rendition of a Green New Deal. @AOC, X.

Interestingly, although such reformist policies are sold to us as more 'politically pragmatic,' reactionary forces resist them every step of the way.[51] This highlights a deeper truth about political strategy: a reformist approach is not an effective way to achieve even mild reforms. As Lenin said, "reforms are won as a result of the *revolutionary class struggle*, as a result of its independence, mass force and steadfastness."[52]

1. Anarchism

Anarchism proposes an entirely different route. It is a revolutionary, anti-capitalist political approach which opposes all forms of domination and oppression.[53] While it is a diverse school of thought, anarchists share the core belief that any political authority, as an expression of domination, is unjustifiable.[54] Therefore, they object to using the state to build eco-socialism.[55]

The central problem with this approach is that it confuses the ultimate objective – a society free of all domination – with the necessary process

of transcending capitalism and imperialism and realising a new world. Liberatory political strategy must first and foremost be rooted in a sober analysis of the concrete conditions.

Currently, conditions are characterised by class domination and rapidly worsening social and ecological crises. As such, liberatory strategy must entail some form of political coercion to quickly shift this balance of power (e.g. via expropriation of the capitalist class).[56] This can only be done at the necessary scale and speed by wielding state power.[57] Moreover, class society will not disappear overnight, and as long as classes exist, so too will the state as an organ of class rule.[58] This alone makes the state a necessary terrain of struggle.



Image 8: A member of the anarchist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo.

Driven by values and ideals rather than an assessment of real-existing material conditions, anarchism is utopian. It does not provide adequate proposals about how to address the crises of the 21st century, nor how to provide essential services to all as we transition away from capitalism.[59] The scale and complexity of capitalism today necessitates large-scale organisation, global coordination, and the capacity to confront ruling-class interests.[60]

In other words, anarchism lacks a theory of transition that can meet this moment of proliferating global crises, extend the struggle to combat them, and carry it forward to collective liberation.

That being said, there is much to be learned from anarchist organising, including certain practices of direct democracy, opposition to oppression, and a willingness to take radical action, whether through mutual aid programmes or forest occupations.[61] Ultimately, we have more in common than not, and thus, should act together in our struggle to build a more democratic society.[62]

Conclusion

Another political approach exists – one which has been handed down, expanded, and updated by generations of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements: *revolutionary (eco-)socialism.*[j]

Revolutionary eco-socialism is not a dogmatic programme, but a method.[63] It allows movements to carry out a concrete analysis of the conditions in which they organise, assess social forces, identify contradictions, and strategise how to exploit them.

Central to this method is the revolutionary party, which, as we outline in the next part of this series, is uniquely equipped to construct a people's bloc to contest and ultimately capture the state.

It is incumbent on eco-socialist organisers to build revolutionary organisations with the exploited and oppressed majorities. Only in this way can we generate and channel social power towards the state, towards eco-socialism, *towards liberation.*

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j This political approach is more commonly referred to as revolutionary socialism, but given the centrality of combining the liberation of all human and non-human life, we believe the term revolutionary eco-socialism is more apt for our conditions today.

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