

The eco-logic of the global capitalist crisis.

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South Africa has been severely affected by the global financial crisis. Despite a return to growth in 2010, the crisis will come back, as long as its fundamental roots are not addressed. Indeed, we need to ask whether the crisis is a purely 'financial' one, or multi-dimensional. Is it of recent origin, or something that began with the market liberalisation of the late 1970s – or does it go right back to the origins of capitalism as a world system, of which South Africa is a microcosm?

Despite the fact that SA's financial sector was much better regulated than at the centres of the global system, the financial crisis has deepened an already severe socio-economic crisis. It accelerated declining manufacturing output or the de-industrialisation of the economy, partly because of a decline in global demand and partly because of the rand's rise against the British pound and US dollar. Most severely, up to one million jobs were lost in 2009, in a context of massive unemployment (unofficially close to 40 per cent of economically active citizens), rising social inequality and persistent poverty. To take two telling indices: over one-third of the population is food insecure, and a quarter of children under six years of age is malnourished (Human Sciences Research Council, cited in Andrews, 2008).

At a fundamental level, there are increasing indications that the country's growth trajectory faces a crisis of 'sustainability' in both senses of the word – sustainable growth that creates decent jobs and rising living standards for all, as well as sustainable growth that protects the natural environment and leaves the earth with sufficient resources for future generations. This crisis is rooted in the structure of the South African economy, which was inherited from the colonial past.

In South Africa, racial capitalism emerged as a result of a minerals-energy complex (Fine and Rustomjee, 1996) – a synergy between the mining industry and fossil energy systems that sustain it, as well as a financial sector that grew out of it. This minerals-energy-financial complex remains central to South African capitalism, subordinating all other economic activities, including manufacturing. It rests on the exploitation of fossil fuels and risky mining operations that have seen the death of tens of thousands of people over the last century. A slowly de-racialising minority experiences the only tangible benefits, whilst the (mainly black) majority live in conditions of underdevelopment in the predominantly rural former homelands, or in polluted slums and townships in the urban areas.

Efforts to move out of this dependence have been half-hearted. The only strategy the state has so far embarked on is a combination of limited redistribution (mainly poverty alleviation through grants), an incoherent land redistribution programme, short-term public works programmes, repeated attempts at an industrial policy and a gradually visible but hitherto lame 'sustainable development' effort. These are undermined by a logic of accumulation that maintains at its centre the minerals-energy-financial complex – as well as a culture of consumerism that rests on ever-expanding, unsustainable wants, fuelled by a sales effort (the advertising/media industry) that is essential to the production/accumulation process.

This logic of uneven (or enclave) capitalist development is, in many ways, a microcosmic expression of global capitalist development. The crisis of sustainability is integrally linked to the global economic/ecological crisis, and can only be fully understood in relation to the global context. This contribution discusses the dimensions of the poly-crisis in historical perspective, and asks whether capitalism

has reached both its natural and its social limits. Is the answer a 'green capitalism' (or for some a 'green New Deal') or does capitalism need to be completely transcended (a form of 'eco-socialism')?

The global poly-crisis

The notion of 'crisis' can take on different meanings, depending on which discipline one is located in. It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin with a commonplace definition. According to the *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1999), a crisis is either, on the one hand, a time of 'difficulty or stress' (or an 'emergency'); or, on the other, a 'turning point' (a crucial or 'decisive' moment). In the first sense, a crisis can come and go, leaving the system largely intact. In the second sense, a crisis can dramatically alter, even overthrow, the system, bringing forth a fundamentally altered state of being. In either case a crisis can be short-term and dramatic, or long-term and gradual, with dramatic eruptions from time to time.

A crisis is usually deemed a crisis by those in the midst of it, experiencing its effects. The poor, hungry and exploited majority of the world's (and South Africa's) population, it could be argued, have been in crisis for much of the twentieth century – stripped of their land and means of subsistence, and forced to sell their labour (if they are lucky) or beg and steal to eke out an existence, often in health-threatening working and living environments deliberately placed close to the polluting waste of industry. From an ecological perspective, the natural world or ecosystem (including other living creatures) has been in various stages of crises as industrial development crowds out non-human animals, forcing them into fenced-off parks and zoos, hunted and sought for trophies, while the destruction of forests, pollution and emissions threaten the very existence of earth as we know it. The latter has only become a concern for the privileged and powerful when it threatened their own system of production and consumption – but only grudgingly, and partially. Many are still in denial.

However, when there is a crisis of profitability, such that the wealth of the rich and powerful is directly threatened, only then is a 'crisis' truly proclaimed. This is even more so when the rich and powerful at the centre of global capitalism – in North America and Western Europe – are affected, which is the case today.

The financial crisis has had a direct impact on the real economy, with low consumer demand leading to a crisis in manufacturing, and millions of job losses throughout the world. This crisis, which began in 2007 and has grabbed the headlines since then, rapidly displaced the ecological crisis gripping the world a few months previously (particularly when oil prices began to approach the \$200 a barrel level). The run-up to, and aftermath of, the December 2009 Copenhagen conference on climate change temporarily put the natural limits to growth back on the global agenda, but with relatively low oil prices (around \$70 a barrel), the minds of the world's governments were insufficiently focussed to produce a binding commitment to lowering carbon emissions and move decisively towards a non-nuclear renewable energy regime.

High oil prices, the threat of depleted fossil fuels (particularly oil) to run the modern economy, oil spills, the destruction of rain forests, the displacement of millions of rural dwellers for the building of dams to supply industry, the rapid decline of bio-diversity, rampant carbon emissions and pollution such as acid rain and acid mine drainage (which endanger the health of both humans and the eco-system) and natural disasters caused by climate change - all of these and many other

ecological disasters are rarely or weakly linked to the economic/financial crisis, and the socio-political consequences of both.

In other words, when we speak of a ‘global crisis’, it is necessary to conceptualise the inter-connected economic, ecological and socio-political crises, as well as a looming food crisis that arises out of them (Roberts, 2008). Indeed, as Foster (1999: 195) observes, the word ‘ecology’, coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, has the same Greek root *oikos* for household, out of which grew the word ‘economy’. Neo-classical economics, as Karl Polanyi (1944) argued, have sought to dis-embed economics from society, as well as nature, to produce what the political economist Ben Fine¹ has called economics imperialism – the subordination of society and nature to a narrow, mathematised and dismal pseudo-science. The poly-crisis points to the necessity to re-embed and subordinate the economy to society and nature.

These crises are rooted in a centuries-long process of what David Harvey (2005), following Rosa Luxemburg, calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’ – the dispossession of people’s land and livelihoods, of the commons, of the natural environment. We are witnessing, in South Africa and globally, the commodification of all that is valued, where wealth is measured not in terms of the intrinsic value of things and relationships, or for Karl Marx their ‘use-value’, but in terms of their exchange value (what they can be bought and sold for – that is, for money).

This process began as merchant capitalism in fourteenth century medieval Europe (Mielants, 2007) and, through the dispossession and plunder of people and resources in Africa, the Americas and Asia, wealth was accumulated in Western Europe, providing the capital for the industrial revolution of the seventeenth century. This, of course, required further waves of colonial plunder and dispossession in the search for cheap labour, resources and markets for an ever-expanding global regime of accumulation.

Capitalism, in other words, is characterised not merely by the marvels of innovation, entrepreneurship, modernisation, higher standards of living and increasing consumer choice. This is only one side of the coin, which the insiders (like readers of this volume) enjoy. More accurately, capitalism is a system of uneven or *enclave* development – namely a world system comprising islands of privilege and power, surrounded by seas of alienated poverty, pollution and plundered resources. The promise of ‘modernisation’ and its ‘neoliberal’ or free market variant, that expanded growth will eventually bring ‘development’ to all the world’s population, has proven to be more myth than reality. Instead, poverty and inequality between and within nations has increased significantly (Bieler et al, 2008). Capitalism, as Marx once said, develops *and* destroys. It simultaneously enriches (the few), and impoverishes (the many). The development of Europe and later North America (the core countries) rested to a significant extent on the underdevelopment of the rest of the colonised world (the peripheral or semi-peripheral countries) (Wallerstein, 1979 and Frank, 1966).

The current capitalist crisis has evoked a variety of responses: from the very narrow, one dimensional approaches (free market and Keynesian-lite) which see the crisis purely as a financial one, to broader Marxist (and Keynesian-Marxist) approaches which conceptualise the crisis as economic, rooted in the stagnation of the real economy (particularly the manufacturing falling rate of profit), to the very broad, multi-dimensional eco-Marxist approaches which see the crisis as a complex interaction between economic, ecological and social crises that has its roots in a

pattern of industrialisation that relies on the exploitation of fossil fuels – what Altwater (2006) calls ‘fossil capitalism’.

In Marxist terms, an economic crisis refers to deep-seated, system-threatening breakdowns in the accumulation process. They can be short-term (for example the Asian crisis of 1997) or long-term (the Great Depression of the 1930s). The current financial crisis is not financial in origin, but has its roots in the stagnation of the real economy (Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Brenner, 2009; Arrighi, 2007). This is due to the falling rate of profit, as a result of two things:

Firstly, the *struggles of subordinate classes*, including the working class at the workplace, as well as the working class and other classes in society at large, to extract as much of the surplus produced as possible, either directly from the employers through higher wages and benefits, or indirectly from the state through higher taxes to fund a higher social wage (in the form of public health care, education, subsidised transport, subsidised food, welfare benefits and other social services).

The second factor, closely inter-related to the first, is *inter-firm competition*, both at the national and the international levels. Rising costs make firms uncompetitive in relation to their competitors, unless they are subjected to the same rising costs. Increased competition spurs on innovation and the accumulation process, giving rise to a crisis of ‘over-production’, which drives down the unit price of commodities. This exacerbates the crisis of profitability, forcing firms to cut back and leading to the under-utilisation of productive capacity. Firms go bankrupt, workers are laid off, and stronger firms take over weaker ones, leading to the monopolisation of capital² (Baran and Sweezy, 1968).

One way out of the cycle of declining profitability, at least temporarily, is to find cheaper sources of labour elsewhere, cheaper raw materials and new markets for excess products. Drawing on David Harvey, Beverly Silver (2004) identifies various ‘fixes’ that capitalism uses to navigate its way out of continuous crises of profitability. These include the spatial fix, where capital moves to cheaper and cheaper locales of production; the product fix, where capital moves from one niche product to another, chasing increased profitability (for example, from textiles to automobiles to information technology); and the technology fix, where through innovation labour-saving technology increases the productivity of labour. These fixes, however, only partially or temporarily address the accumulation crisis

As in the past, a crisis in profitability in manufacturing boosts the financialisation of capitalism. This time, however, with a more globalised economy and new computer technology at their disposal, investments in ‘fictitious’ capital to increase profit rates rapidly overtook investments in the real economy. In the USA, the heart of global capitalism, the percentage of financial profits over total domestic profits in 2007 was just below 40 per cent, compared to well below 20 per cent in the early 1980s and below 15 per cent in the 1960s (Foster and Magdoff, 2009: 93). By contrast, manufacturing profits steadily declined from over 50 per cent of domestic profits in the late 1960s to less than 15 per cent in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff, 2009: 55).

To cut a long and complex story short, the financialisation of capitalism is not the *cause* of the capitalist crisis, but was itself *a response* to the crisis of the 1970s (Brenner, 2009 and Arrighi, 2007). This is what Beverly Silver (2004) calls the financial fix. Inherently crisis-ridden, this ‘fix’ spawned a number of short-term crises in different parts of the world over the past two decades, including the US savings and loan crisis (1989-91), the Japanese asset price bubble collapse (1990), the

Scandinavian banking crisis (early 1990s), the European exchange rate crisis (1992-3), the Mexican debt crisis (1994-5) the East Asian crisis (1997), the Russian crisis (1998), the Argentinian meltdown (2001), and the dot com bubble burst (2001). The current financial crisis, which hit the core developed countries directly, is the deepest since the Great Depression.

Foster and Magdoff (2009), in an extension of the Sweezy and Baran analysis, characterise the new stage of capitalism as monopoly-finance capitalism. It is based on ever-increasing concentrations of capital, under the rule of mega-financial institutions that straddle the globe, where manufacturing firms are intermeshed with financial firms and investments. Despite the anger against these institutions for 'causing' the financial crisis, governments in the USA and Europe are reluctant to take decisive action against them, regarding them as 'too big to fail'. Indeed, executives of these institutions continue to pay themselves enormous salaries and bonuses, with much talk but little action against them. This is unsurprising, given the fact that core government elites are themselves part of what David Rothkopf (2009) calls the "superclass" – six thousand people in a planet of six billion who, in addition to powerful governments and international finance, also run transnational corporations and global media houses (Rothkopf also includes world religions and underground criminal and terrorist empires).

Fossil capitalism is a system of accumulation based on mass consumerism (the creation of everlasting wants), but because of rising global inequality and stagnant or declining real wages, these new wants cannot be satisfied because potential consumers do not have the means to purchase the commodities produced. The only way out is increased indebtedness – household debt in the USA has increased from 62 per cent of GDP in 1997 to 92 per cent of GDP in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff, 2009: 47). Consumer debt as a percentage of disposable income increased from 62 per cent in 1975 to 127 per cent in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff, 2009: 29). This mirrors the increased indebtedness of the US economy as a whole, as it borrows on the financial markets to maintain its position as global hegemon – by fuelling its war machine (a form of military Keynesianism), preserving its legitimacy through social and internal security spending, continuing to provide subsidies to threatened industries (particularly agriculture) and, of course, bailing out the banking system.

Accumulation, 'affluenza' and the rise of the 'Americum'

The end result of over two centuries of 'accumulation by dispossession' is a system of uneven development, with rising inequality both at the national level, in general, and at the global level. According to noted African economist Samir Amin (2008), the proportion of 'precarious and pauperised' members of the working classes (broadly defined to include formal and informal workers and the unemployed) has over the past fifty years risen from less than one quarter to more than one half of the global urban population.

Economic globalisation has, since the 1980s, simultaneously enlarged the periphery within the core countries (within increased informalisation of work and unemployment, and a declining social wage), as well as enlarged the core within the periphery and particularly within the semi-periphery (countries such as Brazil, South Africa and India, and increasingly China), as capital moves around globally. However, with a few exceptions such as the now 'developed' status of east Asian countries like South Korea, the overall global picture of uneven, enclave development

remains intact, at least for the foreseeable future. This is despite ostentatious claims by national elites, such as in India, that their country will be ‘fully developed’ within the next thirty to fifty years – conveniently ignoring that 95 per cent of its workforce is informalised labour (Bieler et al, 2008), while in the rural areas ‘development’ has deepened immiseration, causing a massive increase in farm suicides and the rapid rise of Maoist groups championing the cause of the rural poor (Perry, 2010).

These islands of privilege are, of course, modelled on western patterns of consumption – particularly that of the USA. Thomas Friedman (2008) warns about ‘too many Americans’ in the world today – meaning too many hyper-consumers, influenced over the past decades by American mass media (particularly films, advertising, television shows and magazines) that celebrate the ‘American Dream’ of unsustainable consumption based on the creation of incessant wants (as opposed to real needs). Friedman, a short while ago a celebrant of economic globalisation based on spreading growth everywhere (see Friedman, 1999 and 2005) now warns against ‘America’s affluenza’, ‘*an unsustainable addiction to growth*’ (2008:54, my emphasis).

Friedman (2008: 56) quotes Tom Burke of the NGO 3GE (Third Generation Environmentalism), who coined the term *Americum* – namely a unit of 350 million people with an income above \$15 000 and a ‘growing penchant for consumerism’, particularly American-style energy-sapping living spaces, cars, fast foods and levels of un-recycled garbage. According to Burke, current growth and consumption trends suggest that by 2030 the number of Americums will have increased from two to eight or nine – at least a fourfold increase within the space of between thirty and forty years: in other words, from 700 million people to over 3 billion – half the current world population. Of course the total population will also have also grown (some say to about 7–8 billion by 2030).

If the crisis of accumulation is temporarily arrested, and global growth and ‘prosperity’ increases as suggested, these ‘carbon copies’ of American consumerism will threaten the very foundations of that prosperity. It will inevitably run into the natural limits of growth – what Jeff Wacker of the Electronic Data Systems (quoted in Friedman, p 57) calls the ‘eco-logic of capitalism’ which, says Friedman, has become ‘an important, if not the most important, restraint on growth’. The expansion of Americum production and consumption will require the colonisation of three more planets, because, argues Friedman (2008: 55), ‘we are going to make planet earth so hot, and strip it so bare of resources, that nobody... will be able to live like Americans one day’.

Friedman concedes that it would be arrogant for Americans like himself to urge developing countries not to grow, implying that they should remain poor. He quotes an Egyptian cabinet member:

It is like the developed world ate all the hors d’oeuvre, all the entrees, and all the desserts and then invited the developing world for a little coffee ‘and asked us to fit the bill’. That is not going to happen. The developing world will not be denied. (Friedman 2008:55).

The solution, he argues, is partly for the rest of the world to leapfrog unsustainable technologies and develop on a green basis (which China is beginning to do, albeit inconsistently, given its rising addiction private cars and carbon-intensive power plants). Ultimately, he suggests, this will only happen if America itself undergoes a

green revolution, and radically re-orient its patterns of production and consumption – so that when others copy America, they will not be carbon copies, but *green* copies.

Green capitalism or eco-socialism?

The above analysis from within the very heart of the US establishment – the *eco-logic* of capitalism – resonates to some extent with the emerging eco-Marxist or eco-socialist school of thought (Foster, 2009; Burkett, 2005; Altvater, 2006; Albo, 2006; Lowy, 2006; Kovel, 2002). The ecological consequences of hyper-accumulation, include, in the words of John Bellamy Foster (2002: 12),

global warming, the destruction of the ozone layer, removal of tropical forests, elimination of coral reefs, overfishing, extinction of species, loss of genetic diversity, the increasing toxicity of our environment and our food, desertification, shrinking water supplies, lack of clean air, and radioactive contamination – to name a few. The list is very long and rapidly getting longer, and the spatial scale on which these problems manifest themselves are increasing.

If the socio-economic and ecological crises have a common origin – industrial capitalism – can a solution to these crises be found *within* capitalism, or does the very nature of capitalism need to be *transcended* for solutions for all of humanity, in harmony with the natural environment, to be found?

The answer to this question depends on the paradigm used. Clapp and Dauvergne (2005) give us four basic paradigms that try to make sense of the current crisis, namely the market liberal, institutionalist, bio-environmentalist and social green approaches. Of these the first two, which fit broadly into the ecological modernisation frame, do not question the logic of capitalism, based on heightened economic growth, but differ on the degree of state involvement in addressing the problems. Market liberals believe the market will solve environmental problems, while institutionalists believe in the necessity of global (and national) regulation. The last two, by contrast, tend to be more critical of the subordination of the environment and society to economic growth, with bio-environmentalists placing the natural environment (and population growth) at the centre of concern, while social greens (including Marxist as well as non-Marxist eco-socialists) place human society at the centre, in harmony with the natural environment.

The obvious attempts at ‘greenwashing’, namely using ‘sustainable development’ as a public relations ploy, is arguably the dominant practice of corporations throughout the world, promoted by global institutions such as the World Bank and World Trade Organisation (Peet, 2003; Bruno and Karliner, 2004; Bakan, 2004; Harris-White and Harris, 2006 and Rogers, 2006). Friedman (2008) argues for a ‘green revolution’ within the logic of regulated capitalism. However, he is critical of the tepid greenwashing that passes for sustainable development and makes a strong case for a fundamental reorientation of our economies, where *state regulation* and *standards* need to be imposed in order to spur on innovation towards green solutions to our energy. As such, his approach has shifted from a market liberal to an institutionalist perspective, and is a challenge to those on the eco-socialist left who argue that, because capitalism is the source of the crisis, any solution that benefits the entire globe, and not enclaves of privilege, must transcend capitalist relations of production.

Foster (2009) directly engages with Friedman, criticising his devotion to nuclear power and unproven 'clean coal' technology, which are also part of US President Obama's green strategy. Instead, he asserts:

Yet the more radical ecological solution that seeks an immediate closing down of coal-fired plants and their replacement by solar, wind, and other forms of renewable power – coupled with alterations on the demand-side through the transformation of social priorities – is viewed by vested interests as completely undesirable (Foster 2009: 21).

A 'transformation of social priorities' that addresses enclave development and ecological destruction at the national and global levels would have to take on those vested interests – implying a class struggle between the power elite at the top of the pyramid, and the subordinate classes at the bottom. The difference between traditional twentieth century Marxist-Leninist (or Social Democratic) socialist struggles and a new form of twenty-first century 'eco-socialist' struggle is that while the former is state-centric, and facilitated by a hierarchical (vanguardist or mass based) political party, the latter is society-centric, and facilitated by mass participatory democracy. The form of struggle has a direct bearing on the outcome, following the Gandhian principle 'be the change you want to see'. This is a long-term battle that is already taking shape in discussions and activism for example, at the World Social Forum, as well as in places where the subordinate classes have actually taken power, as in Bolivia and Kerala, India (Williams, 2008).

In the wake of the global crisis that has delegitimised the certainties of neoliberal economics, there is a growing literature on what the content of shifted social priorities entails (for example Ransom and Baird, 2009; Korten, 2009; Eisler, 2009; Patel, 2009). According to Bolivian president Evo Morales (2009: 168),

It is nothing new to live well. It is simply a matter of recovering the life of our forbears and putting an end to the kind of thinking that encourages individualistic egoism and the thirst for luxury. Living well is not living better at the expense of others. We need to build a communitarian socialism in harmony with Mother Earth.

What this actually means in practice is a work in progress, a feeling-around for policies and practices that build social solidarity in harmony with nature. It includes, at minimum, the extension of the commons, or public social goods, including basic services such as water, electricity, education, health, communication and transportation as human rights, not commodities to be bought and sold (Morales, 2009). It means using renewable forms of energy that preserves the earth for future generations, based on the principle of 'sufficiency' (Kovel, 2002) and not endless growth pivoted on endless wants.

There is an emphasis on local and regional economies to, amongst other things, maximise democratic participation, and minimise carbon footprints caused by long-distance trade, particularly in fresh produce (or what some term 'food miles'). For example, Cuba has achieved universally recognised success in getting local communities to produce organic fruit and vegetables in urban food gardens, for consumption by local communities themselves (Barclay, 2003). The Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), which brings together a range of Latin American countries, including Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, offers a

radical reconceptualisation of trade relations based on fair trade, social solidarity and meeting human needs - as opposed to the cut-throat competition embedded in 'free' trade (Hattingh, 2008).

In the longer-term, an eco-socialist vision means shorter working time (which can substantially address the problem of unemployment, provided that it rests on a substantial social wage in the form of free or heavily subsidised public services, funded by, for example, global taxation), and more 'leisure' time to pursue creative and socially useful activities. Frigga Haug (in Bullard, 2009), drawing on Marx's vision of communism, offers the fourfold challenge:

- 4 hours on wage labour (production)
- 4 hours on reproductive work (cooking, cleaning, gardening, caring for families)
- 4 hours on creative work (music, art, poetry, sport)
- 4 hours on political work (community organising etc).

Whether one adopts a Green 'New Deal' perspective, or a more radical eco-socialist perspective,³ both pose fundamental challenges to capitalism's growth-at-all-costs tendencies. South Africa, like most countries in the world, has to deal with powerful vested interests if it wants to wean itself off the minerals-energy-financial complex, which is central to the accumulation-production-consumption treadmill that perpetuates massive social inequality, poverty and environmental degradation.

Conclusion

I have argued that the current crisis cannot be separated from a broader crisis of capitalist growth that many argue is rooted in a manufacturing crisis of profitability, the enduring social crisis experienced by the majority of the world's (and South Africa's) population, as well as an ecological crisis of multiple dimensions (including resource depletion, pollution of various kinds and climate change) that threatens the very existence of the earth as we know it.

As indicated at the outset, South Africa is in many ways a microcosm of the world crisis, given its history of plunder, exploitation and enclave (or bifurcated) development. The wealth of the few is dialectically interlinked with the poverty of the many – a notion that sits uncomfortably with those who dominate the ideological discourse in the country and the world. Instead of the dominant view that separates the 'alleviation of poverty' of the majority from the 'accumulation of wealth' of the few, or the 'economic' from the 'social' and 'ecological', it is necessary to take a more holistic view of the 'poly-crisis' at the global level, in order to understand its impact at the national or local levels. In this sense, the '*alleviation of wealth*' becomes a central pre-condition to the *eradication* of poverty (Sachs, 2001).

Ecological issues, as integral parts of the social and economic spheres, are increasingly being placed on the world's agenda, particularly in parts of Latin America. For example, the 2010 election campaign in Colombia placed an explicitly Green candidate, Anatanas Mockus, the former mayor of Bogota, in a strong position to become the first Green Party president in the world (*Financial Times*, 30 May 2010). Radical attempts to transcend capitalism are being embraced in countries like Bolivia under Evo Morales, who is pursuing an explicit green socialist development strategy (Morales, 2009). The financial and ecological crisis has spurred on greater awareness about the need for fundamental alternatives among activists in social

movements and trade unions around the world (Ransom and Baird, 2009; Angus, 2009).

In South Africa, a new mood is slowly awakening as it becomes clear that the ANC's 'national democratic revolution' (NDR) is little more than a 'national tender revolution' (NTR), where a new or aspiring members of the black elite fight furiously among themselves for the spoils of state patronage in the form of state tenders at local, provincial and national levels. Black economic empowerment, instead of tackling the roots of class power and social inequality, is designed to facilitate the entry of black elites into the world of white economic power and hyper-consumption.

Nevertheless, there are countervailing tendencies in government. In May 2010, the government convened the Green Economy Summit, attended by a range of ministries and the presidency, and driven in large part by the new minister of economic development and former unionist Ebrahim Patel. It seems that much was achieved to address criticism that government efforts have been *ad hoc*, piecemeal and incoherent across government. According to Mark Swilling, who attended the gathering 'this Summit reflects a significant sea change... There [was] unprecedented cooperation between several ministries and the presidency on the need for a green economy and a resource-perspective on future growth'.⁴ Whether this positive development translates into meaningful action, whereby powerful vested interests within government and the minerals-energy-financial complex are tackled head-on, remains to be seen.

Even though the biggest labour formation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) is enmeshed in the NDR/NTR through its alliance with the ruling party, it is increasingly posing critical questions related to corruption, social inequality, growth priorities and, amongst some affiliates, the ecological limits to growth. There are also signs of such shifts in thinking within the South African Communist Party (SACP) (Cronin, 2009 and Bond, 2009). Outside the ANC-SACP-Cosatu alliance, there are embryonic moves to build an alternative pole of attraction, through the Conference for a Democratic Left (comprising former ANC and SACP leaders, as well as Cosatu members and activists from a broad spectrum of left groups around the country). The CDL explicitly pose the possibility of a 'grassroots democratic, eco-socialist, feminist political programme' (CDL, 2010:2) as an alternative to the crisis of fossil capitalism. The hope is that, sooner rather than later, Cosatu as the leading component of the labour movement will finally realise that the Alliance is a dead end of false promises, and will break away to help build a counterhegemonic alternative that places eco-socialism firmly on the agenda. Such an alternative envisions a society-centric notion of a democratic developmental state, based on a mobilised and empowered civil society, as opposed to the state-centric versions that are vulnerable to capture by dominant elites.

South Africa needs to move out of its reliance on the minerals-energy-financial complex in order to create jobs on a sustainable basis – socially as well as ecologically. A genuine, coherent and effectively pursued 'Green New Deal', given the vested interests lined up against it, would be a radical departure from the country's current trajectory. Even if it may not address the root causes of the crisis, it could be a stepping stone towards more fundamental options in the longer-term.

The alternative to a green New Deal and to eco-socialism is either the earth's destruction as we know it, or a new form of eco-fascist 'enclivity', where a small gated minority enjoys the benefits of green technology, secure employment and comfortable lifestyles, while the majority is locked out through repressive force, to

live in polluted squalor. Can the emerging counter-movement, globally and in South Africa, prevent such an outcome? Only time will tell.

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¹ These remarks were made at a Global Labour University workshop in Johannesburg, October 2009.

² The regular emergence of new competitors to challenge existing dominant firms (or, in South Africa's case, the break-up of monopolies such as the Anglo-American Corporation during the post-apartheid era), and hence reduce monopolisation, does not contradict the underlying trend towards monopolisation, as new competitors either become absorbed by, or themselves absorb, the dominant firms – or firms such as South Africa's banks and cellphone service companies collude to keep prices high (hence the need for state regulation, often ineffective, to enforce competition).

³ Ransom and Baird's *People First Economics* (2009), contains alternative perspectives that straddle the New Deal and eco-socialist spectrum.

⁴ E-mail to author, 2 June 2010.