

ECOCIDE AND THE COLONIZATION OF THE FUTURE

On opportunities and challenges of resistance^a

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Introduction

According to the 2022 *Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature*, more than 42,100 species are threatened with extinction^b. It concerns 28% of all assessed species, while an estimated 150-200 plant and animal species disappear every day. The main causes of this loss of biodiversity are industrial agriculture, climate change, changes in land use like deforestation and invasive species. The Anthropocene marks the devastating role of humans, who are themselves greatly affected by these losses¹.

The extinction of species is an important indicator for ecocide. Here, we define ecocide as the irreversible and systematic destruction of ecosystems, necessary for the survival and quality of life of people and non-human species, caused by human agency and socio-economic structures. Since the academic debate about ecocide is shaped by different views, we deliberately emphasize both human agency as well as socio-economic structures. Such a comprehensive perspective is needed to adequately assess and address ecocide by considering the ecological catastrophe in the light of socio-economic inequality and the crisis of democracy. We argue that socio-economic inequalities play a major role in the causes and consequences of ecocide. Moreover, the opportunities for the masses who are most affected, frequently in the Global South (GS), to voice and address their concerns are severely limited, which indicates a democratic deficit that needs attention. Not only do government representatives from the GS frequently still lack power in multilateral organizations, but also ordinary citizens from the GS regularly experience insurmountable hurdles to, for example, attend and voice their concerns at global climate conferences^c.

Against this backdrop we ask what can be done? Our aim is to explore the opportunities and challenges to resist ecocide in relation to socio-economic inequality and the crisis of democracy. To this end, first section focuses on the diagnosis of ecocide. We show that due to three fallacies the connection between ecocide, socio-economic inequality and the crisis of democracy is not sufficiently accentuated. In the second section, several contemporary political measures to deal with ecocide are critically examined. We will argue that Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, is part of the problem as it falsely assumes the compatibility of sustainability and economic growth. Finally, in the third section, the

^a This text was translated in German and published in December 2023: Gabriëls, R. & Nauta, W. (2023). Ökozid und die Kolonisierung der Zukunft: Über Chancen und Herausforderungen des Widerstands. In: T. Pfaff, (ed) *Ökozid: Wie ein Gesetz schwere Umweltschäden bestrafen und Lebensgrundlagen besser schützen kann* (pp. 111-127). Oekom.

^b See: <https://www.iucnredlist.org/>

^c For example, due to funding issues, visa restrictions and limited access to the key decision-making rooms.

opportunities and challenges of resistance to ecocide are discussed with an emphasis on the power asymmetries between the Global North (GN) and the GS.

1. The externalization of ecological and socio-economic costs

Before a successful therapy –resistance– for ecocide is developed, a proper diagnosis is needed. Until we propose our own diagnosis, we would like to critically discuss three common explanations for ecocide and other ecological issues that are popular among politicians, policy makers and even activists.

A first frequently heard explanation regarding ecological issues like ecocide and climate change is population growth². Although endless growth, economically and population-wise, is incompatible with ecological sustainability, a failure to refer to the vastly higher per-capita carbon footprint of the GN, leads to Malthusian conclusions. Without population growth humanity would not be struggling with ecological issues today. This statement is highly problematic and we call this the *Malthusian fallacy*. Population growth is not an explanation, but needs to be explained. Population growth is mainly due to socio-economic inequality. We will therefore argue that this socio-economic inequality is a crucial factor (among others) to consider in explaining ecocide and not population growth.

A second explanation, frequently heard, concerns the role of emerging countries that have industrialized rapidly, such as China and India. In this case, too, attention is diverted away from the wealthy countries, primarily in the GN. We call this diversion tactic *the attribution^d fallacy*. A major factor here, when analysing who bears responsibility, is that the places where goods are produced are seen as central. According to Chen, the wealthy countries, relying primarily on such analyses, shift a substantial part of the blame to emerging countries where production, emissions and pollution have been relocated over the last decades. When the analysis employs per-capita “consumption-based statistics” the wealthy nations of the GN (re-)appear much more dominantly as bearing a larger responsibility for emissions³. In other words, when considering where consumption is taking place of the goods produced in an emerging economy, we get a fairer picture of where responsibility lies. This attribution fallacy is reinforced by what Pogge calls explanatory nationalism, a mechanism through which we fail to see how people in wealthy countries through processes of globalization are “causally connected to severe poverty” in other parts of the world⁴.

The third fallacy boils down to an overemphasis on the above-mentioned large-scale incidents with a clear perpetrator, which makes it easier to ignore the structural causes of ecocide and climate change. For example, an oil spill or forest fire may be seen as something that occurs occasionally, due to grave human errors. Framing such a phenomenon as incidental, when there are good reasons to claim that structural causes are at play, is what we call *the blinding fallacy*. As the headlights of an oncoming vehicle can blind people, they

^d Explaining the cause of something.

are particularly outraged by a devastating incident, while at the same time failing to see the underlying structural causes of ecocide and related socio-economic inequalities.

In our opinion, these three fallacies distract attention from an important structural cause of ecological problems, namely an economic system that creates and sustains socio-economic inequalities that are inextricably linked to ecocide. Earth Overshoot Day, the day when the world's population use more resources than the earth can sustainably regenerate, is illustrative in this regard. In 2022, this day when resource consumption exceeded the world's biocapacity, was July 28^e. Yet, when we note that countries in the GS reach this day much later than countries in the GN, the relationship between socio-economic inequality and the ecological issue is apparent. In 2023 Jamaica will reach this day on December 20, Ecuador on December 6, China on June 2, the US on March 13, Luxembourg on February 14 and Qatar on February 10.

Besides these factual different ecological footprints, it is also worth to use the concept of *externalization*, introduced by Stephan Lessenich⁵. It refers to the transfer of socio-economic and ecological costs, incurred in a certain context, for example, the EU, to the outside world. The classic example is a company that does not factor the ecological costs of the production of commodities –polluting a river– into the price, while the taxpayer ultimately bears the costs for the water treatment plant. Besides ecological costs, socio-economic costs, like child labour are also externalized⁶. In India, for example, children produce stones for the European market under appalling conditions⁷.

Externalization is inherent in a global neoliberal capitalist system that penetrates every corner of the world society. Lessenich argues that “...the wealthy citizens of the world, (...) are well-off because [they] live *off* others –off what they achieve and suffer, *off* what they do and put up with, *off* what they bear and have to accept”⁸. This resonates with what the Ugandan activist Vanesse Nakate, states: “Africa is the least emitter of carbons, but the most affected by the climate crisis.”⁹. When, at the same time, one realizes that global economic growth disproportionately benefits the wealthy and that the “richest 1% emit thirty times more than the poorest 50% of the human population”¹⁰, it is not hard to understand a certain distrust among Africans regarding whether the GN is serious in terms of its climate change mitigation measures.

When the everyday experiences of people, suffering from the externalization of the ecological and socio-economic costs, are not heard and addressed by politicians, one can speak of a democratic deficit. In those cases, research shows that people feel betrayed and often no longer vote¹¹ or support populist parties¹². Activists, like the Occupy Movement in 2011, try to give public expression to those who are not or hardly heard¹³. This global movement not only pointed to various social evils associated with neoliberal capitalism, but with the slogan 'We, The 99%' also to the crisis of democracy. This crisis of democracy, where the 1% has power over the rest, frustrates an adequate response to other crises, like the ecological crisis, so strongly intertwined with global inequities. Without a radical

^e Data retrieved from <https://www.overshootday.org/>

democratization, advocated by the Yellow Vests Movement, XR and DiEM25, the potential for structural change through collective action remains limited.

2. Therapeutic Failures

The externalization of ecological and socio-economic costs by rich countries involves a de facto colonization of other countries. Moreover, Rockström et al. argue that a colonization of the future is also taking place, when, increasingly, people, animals and plants will suffer and die due to contemporary human agency and structural inequalities. Although “balancing feedbacks that cope with, buffer and dampen disturbances” are necessary for a safe and just world¹⁴, such an equilibrium is permanently disrupted. This greatly increases the risk of significant harm. They formulate what needs to be done from a justice point of view and conclude that nothing less than a just global systemic transformation “is required to ensure human well-being (...) across energy, food, urban and other sectors, addressing the economic, technological, political and other drivers of Earth system change”¹⁵. To guarantee access for the poor only the reduction of resource use and subsequent reallocation is needed.

Given the extent of the climate crisis and ecocide the majority, nowadays, is convinced that something needs to change given the severity of the situation, as exemplified for example by the Paris Climate Agreement and Agenda 2030, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹⁶. The latter not only aims to address socio-economic inequalities explicitly, but also the ecological problems. However, we doubt whether the therapy actually offers a structural solution as, in our view, the SDGs are part of the problem. Since the SDGs are embedded in a neo-liberal agenda, they wrongly suggest that sustainability and economic growth are compatible. As long as the UN does not explicitly identify the neoliberal form of capitalism as the main cause of global injustice, no structural change is on the cards.

In our opinion, sustainable growth is an oxymoron. For example, how do we keep global temperature increases below 1.5° C (see Article 2 of the Paris Agreement on climate change) and at the same time (SDG 8.1)^f aim to “Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries”? Also Hickel, who agrees that we need to transition to renewable energy, describes green growth as a “comforting fantasy”¹⁷. We simply cannot transition to renewables “fast enough to stay under 1.5°C or 2°C if we continue to grow the global economy at existing rates”¹⁸. Although the world achieved massive increases in the use of clean energy – “today the world is producing 8 billion more megawatt hours of clean energy each year than in 2000” – energy demand in that same period increased “by 48 billion megawatt hours” due to continued economic growth¹⁹, compensating only 17% of the extra needed energy. Thus, what we really need is reduced emissions, resource extraction and material throughput. Agenda 2030, embedded in a discourse of green or sustainable growth, will not achieve this. It serves the interests of the

^f See: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>

top 1% and the corporations and will not lead to a more ecologically, socially and democratically just world.

Against this background activists and critical scientists work together on formulating radical criticism and proposals for structural transformation, as discussed below.

3. Resistance: towards radical system change

As discussed above, the three fallacies – Malthusian; Attribution; Blinding– generally complicate or even prevent the recognition of ways in which ecocide, socio-economic inequalities and crises of democracy are interlinked. In a recent publication Gupta et al. propose a more integrative approach that they term *Earth System Justice*, “an equitable sharing of nature’s benefits, risks and related responsibilities among all people in the world, within safe and just Earth system boundaries to provide universal life support” for which three principles of justice are highlighted: “interspecies justice and Earth system stability; intergenerational justice (between past and present, and present and future); and intragenerational justice (between countries, communities and individuals)”²⁰. However, in our opinion, these principles and goals cannot be achieved without forms of resistance that aim for radical system change. In this section we discuss potential forms of resistance necessary to close the gap between contemporary reality and ideal.

As people’s experiences with regard to poverty and pollution are often depoliticized, it is part of the struggle of social movements to turn the grievances, indignation and suffering of people into a public affair²¹. Such sense of injustice can be an important driver of activism and political resistance²². In a functioning democracy, at the most basic level, ‘the people’ have the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their quality of life. Crises of democracy, witnessed all over the world, occur when opportunities for self-government are systematically undermined, political participation is limited and politicians are unresponsive to actual needs. Obviously, in more authoritarian settings chances are even higher that people’s voices are oppressed and remain unheard. As a result, all over the globe forms of activism emerge, as people organize bottom-up responses and resistances to the large-scale socio-economic and ecological crises. An obvious example here is the *Fridays for Future* movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018.

Global interdependencies make it utterly impossible for nation-states to sufficiently protect citizens against the consequences of decisions made by actors beyond their borders. Yet, it is at the local level where people are experiencing the consequences. To marry the *local* and the *global*, the concept of *glocalization* is useful, since it brings together the global intensification of dependencies beyond national borders in different domains (economy, media, law, culture and politics) while also recognizing the articulation of local particularities²³. This global-local nexus is relevant to all kinds of activism through which people worldwide respond critically to the crises they face. The glocalization of activism refers to cases where people establish transnational networks when expressing their unease and solidarity across borders, while at the same time taking account of local differences. Interestingly, new scholarship is also emerging building on the work of Keck and Sikkink who

coined the term Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs)²⁴. Moreira et al., for example point to the more recent phenomenon of South–South Transnational Advocacy Networks (SSTANs) as “...Southern actors are mobilizing against new and emerging patterns of South-South cooperation which” despite occurring not on a North-South axis, reproducing quite familiar capitalist “asymmetrical power relations and socio-environmental burdens”²⁵.

It is also crucial to be aware of potential ‘Western’ or Eurocentric biases. As Pailey contends, we should aim to avoid racial hierarchies that frequently still inform many (sustainable) development efforts²⁶. Therefore, a scholar like Escobar urges us to recognize and take inspiration from struggles in the GS which have an anti-capitalist dimension and may help us reconnect with the earth and reconstruct the communal, based on relationality to other human beings and other beings. An example that Escobar explores is the “Afrodescendant^g community of La Toma, also in Colombia’s southwest, engaged in a struggle against gold mining since 2008”²⁷. Not only do such local communities struggle against the forces of global capitalism, like transnational corporations, but as Escobar argues, such “resistance takes place within a long history of domination and resistance”²⁸. In fact, these communities “have knowledge of their continued presence in the territory since” the early 17th century²⁹. Not only are these struggles politically relevant, but also contain essential epistemological and ontological lessons.

It is relevant to distinguish between *mainstream criticism* and *radical criticism*³⁰. In the case of the former, the criticism is aimed at making improvements within the current socio-economic order, leading to improved coordination of the actions, as well as better effectiveness and productivity. Radical criticism, on the other hand, is directed at the socio-economic order itself, because it acknowledges that the way in which global society is structured cannot be separated from the crises faced by humanity. This criticism is called radical because it does not focus on changes within the capitalist system but proposes to change the system itself in order to achieve structural solutions for socio-economic equalities, the ecological crises and democratic deficits.

An example of such a radical critique is proposed by Escobar, who contends that it is crucial to recognize that processes of neoliberal globalization go hand in hand with a powerful dominant Euro-modernist and capitalist understanding of the world –a *One World World* (OWW). In his view, Epistemologies of the South (ES), ways of knowing and understanding the world that translate into ways of being in that world, are being undermined by an ontology^h that ‘occupies’ nearly every territory of the planet, namely “that of the universal world of individuals and markets (the OWW) that attempts to transform all other worlds into one”³¹. This ontology strongly shapes our analyses, understandings and potential solutions of the interlocking ecological, democratic and socio-economic crises, whether through the SDGs or the dominance of globally operating Transnational Corporations (TNCs). Escobar, therefore, calls for a pluriversalⁱ understanding of the world, taking

^g Of African origin, outside the African continent, frequently due to slavery.

^h Claims and explanations regarding the nature of being and existence.

ⁱ Instead of a universal capitalist understanding of the world, the recognition and inspirational value of other ways of being in the world.

inspiration from indigenous groups in Latin America, Asia and Africa. These groups are not only involved in material struggles but also in “contemporary struggles for the defence of territories and difference [which] are best understood as ontological struggles and as struggles over a world where many worlds fit, as the Zapatista put it; they aim to foster the pluriverse”³². They do not accept the singular reality, or way of being, that the OWW frame imposes on them in which ‘development’ and ‘economic growth’ are central elements. Crucially here is that we take inspiration from GS struggles to reconnect with nature and reconstruct the communal in which relationality plays an important role³³.

Escobar urges us to pursue “a new intimacy with the Earth”³⁴ and find inspiration in, for example, *Ubuntu*. In the philosophical, cultural and societal tradition of Bantu-speaking peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a more communal understanding of personhood prevails compared to ‘Western’ societies. For example, “...the amaXhosa people in the Eastern Cape of South Africa would often refer to the saying: *umntu ngumtu ngabanye abantu*, ‘a person is a person through other people’”³⁵. Though one should avoid uncritical romanticisation, it is safe to say that a stronger emphasis on relationality determines how many in SSA see themselves relative to others, where your suffering is my suffering.

According to Ramose one can even distil quite a fundamental anti-capitalist understanding of wealth accumulation in Ubuntu tradition and philosophy. He illustrates that with the Sesotho “*proverb of feta kgomo o tshware motho*, translated literally as ‘go past the cow and catch the human being’”. Faced with the choice to preserve one’s individual wealth (your cow) and helping someone in dire need “you are obliged to opt for the latter”³⁶. Moreover, also important in an anti-capitalist sense, it encourages “individuals to exercise moderation in accumulating and allocating to themselves the necessities of life”, imposing “...limits upon the quest for individual happiness”³⁷.

Although rather brief, such pluriversal more relational understandings of what it means to be human may help us to more intimately reconnect with the earth and voice radical criticism and propose alternatives. One such an alternative is *degrowth*. Centrally, *degrowth* is radically critical of our modern-day growth fetish. According to D’Alisa et al. it:

“...calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic **growth** as a social objective, [and also signifies] a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. ‘Sharing’, ‘simplicity’, ‘conviviality’, ‘care’ and the ‘commons’ are primary significations of what this society might look like”³⁸.

In *Less is More*, Hickel outlines the potential of *degrowth*. In the chapter “Pathways to a post-capitalist world”, he calls to abolish “planned obsolescence” (appliances with a built-in shortened life-span) and the importance of a “right to repair”; cutting advertising (a multi-billion dollar industry to expand consumption); shift “from ownership to usership” (stimulate sharing, public resources and goods rather than private ownership, while avoiding corporate capture); end “food waste” (50% of all produced food is wasted); and to scale “down ecologically destructive industries” (the arms industry, industrial meat production/consumption, private jets, etc.)³⁹. Crucially, in *degrowth*, the largest ‘sacrifices’ are demanded of the people and nations of the GN and extremely wealthy elites across the

globe. By curbing the ecological footprint of the wealthy, ecological room is created for other places on the planet –read the GS– to still pursue a certain degree of growth, along sustainable development paths, until their maximum ecological footprint is reached.

In conclusion, we call to broaden our understanding of ecocide. To avoid the three fallacies –Malthusian; Attribution; Blinding– we need to tackle ecological issues, socio-economic inequalities and democratic deficits. Only through structural transformation can we achieve a form of global justice that also benefits the vulnerable in the GS.

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- ¹ Böhning-Gasse & Bauern, *Verschwinden der Arten*.
 - ² Ripple et al., *Warning of a Climate Emergency*.
 - ³ Chen, *Ecological Imperialism*, 481.
 - ⁴ Pogge, *World Poverty*, 15.
 - ⁵ Lessenich, *Living well at Others' expense*.
 - ⁶ Nogler and Pertile 2016, *Child Labour in a Globalized World*.
 - ⁷ Glocal Research, India Committee of the Netherlands & Stop Child Labour 2020, *Granite Modern Slavery*.
 - ⁸ Lessenich, *Living well at Others' expense*, 14.
 - ⁹ Nakate, *A Bigger Picture*, 2.
 - ¹⁰ Hickel, *Less is More*, 29.
 - ¹¹ Schäfer, *Democracy's Discontent*; Offe, *The Austerity State*.
 - ¹² Manow, *Politische Ökonomie des Populismus*.
 - ¹³ Graeber, *Inside Occupy*; Smaligo, *The Occupy Movement*.
 - ¹⁴ Rockström et al., *Earth System Boundaries*, 2.
 - ¹⁵ Rockström et al., *Earth System Boundaries*, 8.
 - ¹⁶ United Nations, *Transforming our World*.
 - ¹⁷ Hickel, *Less is More*, 23.
 - ¹⁸ Hickel, *Less is More*, 137.
 - ¹⁹ Hickel, *Less is More*, 138.
 - ²⁰ Gupta et al., *Earth System Justice*, 3.
 - ²¹ Simmons, *Grievances Do Matter*.
 - ²² Moore, *Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*.
 - ²³ Robertson, *Globalization*, 173-174.
 - ²⁴ Keck & Sikkink, *Transnational Advocacy Networks*.
 - ²⁵ Moreira et al., *South-South Transnational Advocacy*, 77.
 - ²⁶ Pailey, *The 'White Gaze' Of Development*, 730.
 - ²⁷ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 20.
 - ²⁸ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 20.
 - ²⁹ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 19.
 - ³⁰ Jaeggi and Wesche, *Was ist Kritik?*
 - ³¹ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 20.
 - ³² Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 13.
 - ³³ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 23.
 - ³⁴ Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth*, 27.
 - ³⁵ Nauta, *Challenges of South-South Cooperation*. 70.
 - ³⁶ Ramose, *Death of Democracy*, 293.
 - ³⁷ Ramose, *Death of Democracy*, 295.
 - ³⁸ D'Alisa, *Degrowth*, 32.
 - ³⁹ Hickel, *Less is More*, 207-220.