

# Eco-Utopia from Below

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At a time when much climate literature emphasizes inadequate “deals” with capitalism or catastrophe-prone nuclear and geengineering technologies, it’s refreshing to read two uncompromising proposals for ecological revolution. Despite coming from different political traditions, anarchist and Marxist, they reach overlapping conclusions regarding the necessity to reject elites’ false solutions, reduce global production, support participatory planning, and establish healthier relations with nonhuman beings. With solutions at hand, and the dead-ends increasingly obvious, the ways forward appear to be getting clearer.

## Solutions Abound

First, Peter Gelderloos’s *The Solutions Are Already Here: Ecological Revolt from Below*, is a cartography of movements resisting extraction, growing local food, and restoring ecosystems. Compared to the ecocidal ruling class and its spurious opposition among the mainstream left, autonomous uprisings can be remarkably effective using a minimum of resources. Based on extensive research and interviews, Gelderloos demonstrates that this web of struggle “represents the best hope for our planet” (146), should it further scale up and coordinate efforts.

He discusses, for example, Mexico’s town of Cherán where *P’uerépecha* residents militantly rose up in 2011 and kicked out loggers, drug cartels, police, and politicians. Ever since, they have self-governed using horizontal methods of popular assembly and communal mediation (127). Volunteer patrols, accountable to popular councils, confiscate chainsaws from unauthorized loggers and monitor that farmers follow the ban on growing water-intensive avocado trees for commercial purposes. The town has implemented one of Mexico’s most advanced recycling programs, and with help from an impressive tree nursery, they’ve reforested over half of the previously deforested area.<sup>1</sup>

Gelderloos discusses how various communities grow their own food. We read of Brazil’s *Teia dos Povos* network which has reclaimed large territories and grown enough food to live on. Its farmers are generally either practicing or transitioning to agroecology (110). Also in Brazil, *Tupi-Guaraní* communities, with support from anarchists in *Cultive Resistência*, are recovering and restoring land that’s been damaged by mining. They meet daily needs with their own harvests, including sweet potatoes, cassava, and fruit (116). *The Solutions Are Already Here* describes sizable urban farming and gardening projects established by horizontally run communes, including the Canary Islands’ *La Esperanza*, South Africa’s *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, and Mississippi’s Cooperation Jackson (134, 141,

144).

Like the radical ecological movement itself, the book's strongest suit regards blockades of extractive projects. Gelderloos interviews an anarchist involved in the Dayak tribes' struggles against oil palm plantations. Blocking roads and seizing heavy equipment, the Dayak have halted land clearing, at least for now, in the Lamandau Regency, on the island of Kalimantan (Borneo), Indonesia (91). When covering more well-known blockades, such as France's ZAD, Gelderloos criticizes how reformist elements defanged the movement shortly after it successfully stopped a planned airport (93-102).

Had it been a longer book, *Solutions* likely would have discussed other contemporary eco-societies, such as Sri Lanka's *Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement*, Mexico's Zapatistas, Syria's Democratic Confederalists, and Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, in addition to countless other localities maintaining Indigenous and traditional practices of sustainability. It also might have argued for the importance of global cooperation through bottom-up federations like *La Via Campesina*, Global Ecovillage Network, and the International Workers' Association.<sup>2</sup>

Gelderloos does not dwell much on the technological aspects of solutions, but the relatively low-tech future he envisions could easily be powered with small-scale renewables. He imagines decentralized production of wind turbines and tin-based perovskite solar cells, land transportation by electric-powered trains and buses, and ocean transportation by expropriated sailboats and yachts. His apparent support for bioenergy is less convincing (177, 188). Not only does all bioenergy emit toxins and carbon dioxide, but Gelderloos's proposed burning of agricultural residue is even dirtier than burning trees.<sup>3</sup> He also seems to support spreading biochar in fields, an understudied practice that risks emitting airborne particulate matter and negatively impacting plant growth.<sup>4</sup>

Gelderloos calls, in short, for "the networking of thousands of empowered territories" that can survive, outlast, and replace the dying capitalist system (199). However ambitious this sounds, it beats waiting for improbable salvation from CEOs and presidents.

### **From Nowhere to Everywhere**

Then, there's *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics*, by Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass, proposing a global production decrease alongside a participatory shift toward renewable energy and plant-based diets. Mitigating much stress on the Earth, this plan would enable a return to far safer levels of biodiversity and atmospheric carbon dioxide.

The authors envision these transformations being achieved by a "Half Earth socialist" coalition of environmentalists, Indigenous peoples, scientists, vegans, and feminists, among others. Getting these groups to work smoothly together will require a degree of compromise, with Marxists abandoning their tradition's productivism, and vegans "temper[ing] their attacks on Indigenous hunting" (16), for instance. They're careful to repudiate conservation's colonialist legacy, and call for nature preserves to be "under Indigenous leadership wherever possible" (74). Their vision aligns much more with community-based versions of conservation than with the fortress-conservation model of human-free parks.

The term "Half-Earth," made famous by E.O. Wilson, refers to a proposal for turning half of the planet into protected areas. Vettese and Pendergrass trace the idea back to the journal *Wild Earth*, in the early 1990s, but I've encountered a 1977 proposal by Mulford Sibley that, "Approximately one half of the surface of the earth is reserved for wilderness areas."<sup>5</sup> Abolishing animal agriculture would, by itself, be sufficient to raise the world's protected areas from 15 percent of habitable land to over 50 percent (11, 77). Such a trajectory, Vettese and Pendergrass explain, would have

multiple benefits including protecting biodiversity, sequestering atmospheric carbon, and drastically reducing the rate of zoonotic illness. Although critics call Half Earth an overreach, I actually think that protecting 75 percent, the amount needed to cover every terrestrial plant species and to secure ocean populations, comes closer to what's needed.<sup>6</sup>

Vettese and Pendergrass give a courageous critique of the anthropocentrism of their Marxist roots. They lament that Marx "mocked those who 'childishly wonder at the cuckoo laying eggs in another bird's nest,'" that Trotsky "hunted ducks," that Stalin "killed his pet parrot with his bare hands' (32-3). This is not even to mention Mao's famine-inducing campaign to exterminate the sparrow.<sup>7</sup>

Far from sharing Marx and Engels's hostility to utopian socialism, the authors identify as utopians in the tradition of William Morris, Otto Neurath, and Ursula Le Guin. They even name one of their chapters after Morris's 1890 utopian novel *News from Nowhere*. Following the best of this tradition, they are quite serious about the details of implementing communism on Earth, creating a world where utopia is everywhere rather than no-place.

In this vein, Vettese and Pendergrass devote many pages to the mechanics of economic planning. Half-Earth socialism, they explain, would fuse linear programming with cybernetics, building on Stafford Beer's viable systems model. They celebrate this model's emphasis on local participation and compare it favorably in contrast to "top-down authoritarian" forms of planning (119-120). Although Beer spearheaded Chile's short-lived Project Cybersyn under Salvador Allende's government, the principles can be applied in stateless contexts. There's no reason why the system's five components—implementation, coordination, self-organization, intelligence, and ethos—couldn't be achieved through entirely horizontal networks of assemblies, councils, and working groups.<sup>8</sup>

### **Question of the State**

Appealing to Verso Books's mainly Marxist audience, Vettese and Pendergrass sometimes exhibit a strange infatuation with central planning, going so far as to speak nostalgically of the Soviet Union's Gosplan. I find these parts the least convincing, particularly in light of Gelderloos's devastating critique of the state.

As Gelderloos argues, states throughout history have demonstrated ecocidal patterns in order to maintain control over their populations. First, Gelderloos refers to James Scott's work on states imposing monocultural agriculture and forestry. Homogenous crops are easier to surveil and tax, and they keep populations relatively immobile. Second, he notes that states tend to impose dependence by seizing the commons from communities with the most stakes in and knowledge of local conditions. This often takes the form of deliberate environmental destruction, an act of "catching the fish by draining the pond," such as when the U.S. government exterminated bison to take away a food source for Great Plains peoples. Even land grabs in the name of conservation have an ecologically destructive effect in the longer term, since states are far worse caretakers than commons-based communities directly invested in protecting their surroundings (19-20, 28).

Self-proclaimed socialist states, too, have a highly ecocidal record. The Soviet Union, aside from allowing the world's worst nuclear power meltdown, plundered the countryside and implemented highly-polluting forms of industrialization. Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales encouraged extractivist policies detrimental to Indigenous peoples and ecosystems. China is the world's top carbon polluter.

Even Cuba's post-1988 ecological transition, praised by both books, should be credited to popular society rather than to Havana's government. During this period, Cubans rapidly started organic and urban gardens, replaced car commutes with biking, and returned about a third of farmland to wilderness (Vettese and Pendergrass, 83). It was the horizontally-structured *campesino-a-campesino*

movement, not central planning, that spread sustainable agroecological techniques, boosting both per-hectare and per-hour yields.<sup>9</sup> Gelderloos reports that Cuba's transition "was decentralized in nature, and some who lived through that moment tell me the main thing the government did was to get out of the way and allow communities to self-organize" (135-6).

Still, as much as I share Gelderloos's belief in making ourselves ungovernable, I do think our movements could use considerable practice in *self-governance*. It's understandable that he rejects the desirability of a unified global plan (168), such as that of Vettese and Pendergrass, and considers heterogeneity and decentralization to be assets for movements. However, I can't help but feel he's understating the necessity for coordination and structure. While there's plenty of discussion of cooperatives and communes, there's little talk about how they'd confederate and achieve bioregional, continental, or even worldwide goals. It's worrying that Gelderloos doesn't seem to hold out hope for preventing a cataclysmic 2 degree Celsius temperature rise above pre-industrial levels (182), enough to lock in the "Hothouse Earth" trajectory leading to much higher temperatures.<sup>10</sup>

If we're going to prevent such scenarios, a great deal of bottom-up planning and cooperation will be required. Syndicalism and social ecology barely appear in the book, but these theories provide detailed alternatives to statecraft. If we horizontalists don't provide convincing theories of stateless planning, I worry that we'll lose ground to eco-Leninists.

### **Liberatory Pathways**

Both books happen to end with fictional portrayals of a post-capitalist world a few decades in the future. Gelderloos's scenario is set in Catalan territories and Vettese and Pendergrass's in Massachusetts. There are some differences, with fictional Catalan areas retaining small-scale livestock husbandry and fictional Massachusetts maintaining elected representatives. But both scenarios could easily coexist in the same future. Both depict a world that's moved in the direction of what vegan-anarchists call "Total Liberation," meaning the full liberation of humans, animals, and the Earth.

Animal liberation is currently a hard sell for some leftists who aren't ready to give up meat. But it seems that empowering workers, so that no one is desperate enough to accept slaughterhouse work, would drastically reduce animal consumption globally and especially in the world's richer areas. The words of Upton Sinclair seem prophetic here: "eventually those who want to eat meat will have to do their own killing and how long do you think the custom would survive then?"<sup>11</sup> While Gelderloos does support a limited degree of non-commodified animal consumption, his proposals overall would move society in the same direction as Half-Earth Socialism's veganism. In Gelderloos's imagined future, "industrial meat production was shut down with all haste" (179). And he goes perhaps even further than Vettese and Pendergrass in rejecting Western ideas of "human superiority" and supporting such groups as the Animal Liberation Front (58).

It's interesting that my own proposal, the Total Liberation Pathway, reaches many of the same conclusions as these books, even though I drafted and submitted it well before I'd read either one. Relying on climate models and scientific literature, I found that an eco-anarchistic world could meet everyone's vital needs while allowing 82 percent of the Earth's habitable land to be rewilded.<sup>12</sup> Vettese and Pendergrass reach the strikingly similar conclusion that in an ecosocialist society with fully-renewable power sources, "a whopping 81 percent of land can be left to nature (thus preserving 95 percent of all species according to [E.O.] Wilson's formula)" (110). I found that population growth doesn't significantly impede ecological goals, increasing global land use by only a couple percentage points. Likewise, Vettese and Pendergrass conclude, "That Half-Earth socialism could provide a good life for our abundant species and still protect the environment makes clear that the Malthusian fear of 'overpopulation' is dangerously exaggerated" (108). I also estimated that the

work week could be substantially reduced, to the point where needs could be met without work being compulsory. Likewise, Gelderloos envisions a relatively low-tech future in which production is turned into voluntary craft. In his scenario, factories run only a couple days a week, there's far less transport of food, electric usage is a quarter of today's, and global shipping has decreased to just 2 percent of prior levels (174-189).

I'm excited to play the free computer game that will soon be released on the Half-Earth Socialism website.<sup>13</sup> I found when designing the Total Liberation Pathway that playing around with climate models, despite their limits, can be a fun endeavor in addition to being a useful component of envisioning a sustainable future. This task is far too important to be left only to the scientists and policymakers. Even more important, though, is researching and supporting the myriad groups Gelderloos discusses. It's admirable that he has decided to donate all author proceeds to Indigenous struggles in Indonesia and Brazil.

Both books, coming from different political origins, envision a world that's moved considerably closer to sustainability. If activists widely read and discussed both books, they'd develop sharper visions and strategies for ecological revolution. This development would provide a rare bit of good news regarding the prospects for the future of humanity and the Earth.

## Notes

1. Scott Campbell, "The Bonfires of Autonomy in Cherán" in *Deciding for Ourselves: The Promise of Direct Democracy*, ed. Cindy Millstein (Oakland: AK Press, 2020). Jennifer Gonzalez Covarrubias, "A Mexican Indigenous town's Environmental Revolt," *Phys.org*, December 21, 2019.
2. To be fair, Gelderloos has discussed many of these groups in past books such as *Anarchy Works: Examples of Anarchist Ideas in Practice* (Bristol: Active Distribution/Sto Citas; 2nd edition, 2015) and *The Failure of Nonviolence* (Seattle, Left Bank Books, Revised edition, 2015)
3. Mike Ewall, "Environmental Hierarchy of Waste Management & Energy Production Methods," Energy Justice Network, Mark Jacobson, *100% Clean, Renewable Energy and Storage for Everything* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 3.
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5. Mulford Q. Sibley, *Nature and Civilization: Some Implications for Politics* (Itasca: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1977), 269.
6. Ana S Rodrigues and Kevin J. Gaston, "How Large Do Reserve Networks Need to Be?" *Ecology Letters* 4 (2001): 602-9. Bethan C O'Leary, Marit Winther-Janson, John M. Bainbridge, Jemma Aitken, Julie P. Hawkins, and Callum M. Roberts. "Effective Coverage Targets for Ocean Protection." *Conservation Letters* 9, no. 6 (2016): 398-404.
7. John Platt, "The Great Sparrow Campaign Was the Start of the Greatest Mass Starvation in History," *Treehugger*, July 30, 2019.
8. Thomas Swann, "Anarchist Cybernetics," *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* on-line, *Institute for Anarchist Studies*, May 13, 2021.
9. Peter Michael Rosset, Braulio Machín Sosa, Adilén María Roque Jaime, and Dana Rocío Ávila Lozano, "The *Campesino-to-Campesino* Agroecology Movement of ANAP in Cuba: Social Process Methodology in the Construction of Sustainable Peasant Agriculture and Food Sovereignty," *Journal*

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11. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1906), 409.

12. Dan Fischer, "Let Nature Play: A Possible Pathway of Total Liberation and Earth Restoration," *Green Theory & Praxis Journal* 14, no. 1 (2021), 8-29.

13. Half-Earth Socialism website.