

The imperial mode of living and the political ecology of labour

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Markus Wissen, Berlin School of Economics and Law, and Ulrich Brand, University of Vienna

Introduction: Labour versus environment

In June 2020 the German federal government agreed on a fiscal stimulus package in the amount of 130 billion Euro in order to cope with the economic consequences of the Corona crisis.

Contrary to many expectations and in spite of intense lobbying activities by the car industry, the package did not include a buyer's premium (scrapping bonus) for vehicles with a combustion engine. Only the buyers of electric cars will benefit from an (increased) premium.¹ The two Christian-democratic ministers for transport and for the economy who had struggled for a premium also for conventional cars had to give in the resistance by their coalition partner from the Social Democrats. The recently elected heads of the SPD (both are not ministers), who belong to the party's left wing, had declared a buyer's premium for conventional cars the red line whose crossing would have put the continuation of the coalition government between the SPD and the Christian democrats at risk.

The non-inclusion of cars with a combustion engine into the government's stimulus package on the one hand was welcomed by environmental organisations and also by a larger public. On the other hand it was strongly criticized not only by the car manufacturers and their association, but also by the board of the metal workers' union (IG Metall), which in the last years had begun to make its support of the idea of a socio-ecological transformation more explicit: In October 2018 it had organised a "Transformation Congress" and in June 2019 a large demonstration in favour of a 'social, ecological and democratic future' in Berlin; in July 2019 it published a common paper with Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) and the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) on the basic points of an energy and mobility transformation; in August 2019 the union's chairman, Jörg Hofmann, met with representatives of Fridays for Future; finally and in the same

¹ In the crisis of 2009, the scrapping bonus in Germany was 2.500 Euro per car. Within a few month, 1.75 million old cars were scrapped before the end of their life cycle and new cars sold. Since July 2020, the premium (called "environment bonus") on buying an e-car or a plug-in hybrid car is up to 6.000 Euro from the government and 3.000 Euro from the companies (however the companies calculate this).

month, the metal workers' union issued a declaration in which it welcomed the participation of its members in the climate strike activities upcoming in September.

In June 2020 however, things seemed to have changed. The government's decision to subsidize only the acquisition of supposedly environmentally sound electric cars and thereby link the stabilisation of a crisis-ridden sector with its ecological modernisation was strongly criticized by trade unionists: the head of the work council at Daimler expressed his disappointment, his colleague at Audi complained about the government package's focus on electric cars, and the chairman of IG Metall saw an industrial policy wrong-way drive ('industriepolitische Geisterfahrt') that has caused a massive loss of confidence in the head of the social-democratic party on the side of workers and unions.²

One could argue that these harsh reactions to a rather slight ecological component of a government package, that otherwise aims at recovering growth, are due to the severe socio-economic impact of the Corona crisis: in face of impending job losses on a large scale, unions turn to their core business of securing the immediate interests of their members and strive towards crisis-corporatist arrangements with governments and employers. But this would only be half of the story. The other half is that unions are well aware of the fact that capital also utilises the Corona crisis as a pretence to enforce what under 'normal' capitalist conditions would be more difficult to achieve: the competition-driven restructuring of an entire sector. Thus Jürgen Kerner, member of IG Metall's executive board, recently warned against the loss of 300.000 jobs in the union's area of responsibility, most of them in the car industry. A large part of these losses would be 'optimising under the disguise of Corona'.³

But if it is clear to high-ranking union representatives that the Corona crisis is a catalyst rather than the cause of a major capitalist restructuring, why then do they tend to lapse into well-known patterns of crisis-corporatism instead of following their own insight into the necessity of fundamental socio-ecological transformation to the benefit not only of society but also of their own members? Our argument is that this hesitance is due to prevailing patterns of production

² See 'Verzicht auf Autokaufprämie verschärft Konflikt zwischen SPD und Gewerkschaft', in *Der Spiegel*, 5 June 2020 (spiegel.de).

³ Thomas Fromm, „Herbststurm im Anflug. IG-Metall-Vorstand Jürgen Kerner warnt vor großem Jobabbau“, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 July 2020, p. 15.

and consumption that are normalized through everyday perceptions and practices and are backed by institutions, infrastructures and social relations of forces.

These patterns are at the root of what we call the *imperial mode of living* (IML). They are reproduced through the current move with massive state support (far beyond the amount of any scrapping bonus) towards the production of electric cars but without questioning the automobile- (and air transport-)centred mobility system. The IML concept explains the hegemony of the reproduction of production and consumption patterns that impedes more equal, solidary and sustainable social and international relations even in times of aggravating crises. However, there is also evidence for breaks in the hegemonic constellation of an “automobile consent” (Brand and Wissen 2021) and for a possible contributions of workers and unions in overcoming the latter. In the following we introduce the IML concept, reconstruct the history of workers’ inclusion into the imperial mode of living, critically discuss the *just transition* concept as a way out of the imperial mode of living and finally turn to a more radical democratic and internationalist approach to socio-ecological transformation.⁴

Imperial mode of living

Our Interest in working with and further developing the concept imperial mode of living – more precisely imperial mode of *production and living* – is a particularly socio-ecological and internationalist one to understand the productive and destructive forces of global capitalism and the reproduction of inequality as a complex social relation. The imperial mode of living is in crisis (see John Smith’s paper) but it has also stabilising and hegemonic features (even in the Corona crisis) – it’s a relatively stable structure. We particularly want to emphasise the role of capitalist societal nature relations (and the urgently needed alternatives given the deepening ecological crisis) which are at the core of the concept imperial mode of living.

The normative dimension of the concept can be condensed in the formula that solidarity means – besides its inter-relational dimension – not to live at the cost of others and a the cost of nature, i.e. to overcome a mode of production that essentially rests on exploitation of human labour power and the destruction of the bio-physical foundations of life on earth. In that sense,

⁴ The following sections in part are taken from Markus Wissen and Ulrich Brand: Workers, trade unions and the imperial mode of living. Labour environmentalism from the perspective of hegemony theory, forthcoming in: Nora Räthzel, Dimitris Stevis, David Uzzell (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

solidarity has a highly institutionalised and structural dimension as it also implies to enable people and societies that they *must* not live at the expense of others and nature.

Our basic assumption is that the deeply rooted patterns of production and consumption, which predominate above all in the early industrialised capitalist societies, presuppose the disproportionate access to nature and labour power on a global scale. Developed capitalism is characterized by the fact that it requires a less developed or non-capitalist geographical and social 'outside', from which it obtains raw materials and intermediate products, to which it shifts social and ecological burdens, and in which it appropriates both paid labour and unpaid care services. It is exclusionary and exclusive and it presupposes an imperialist world order, which at the same time is normalised in countless acts of production and consumption so that its violent character is rendered invisible for those who benefit from it.

We understand the *imperial mode of living* as a concept of hegemony theory in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci, which connects the everyday life of people with the social and international structures and thus reveals the prerequisites of capitalist patterns of production and consumption. As such, it also refers to the way of working and producing in capitalist societies. Exploitation of nature and labour power is not only a structural feature of the relationship between the global North and the global South. Instead, it takes place in the class, patriarchal and racialized societies of the global North itself, where significant social and spatial inequalities exist and have increased in recent decades. What we want to emphasize however is that the exploitation of labour power in advanced capitalist countries is inherently linked to, and mediated by, exploitative structures elsewhere.

Alf Hornborg has pointed to this in his work on 'unequal ecological exchange' (Hornborg 2017, 2019). Accordingly, the high degree of labour productivity in advanced capitalist countries is due not only to scientific discoveries and domestic social conflicts resulting in a sophisticated technology of production (the endogenous growth of productivity, Marcel van der Linden refers to in his paper). It is also based on the asymmetric material transfers on a global scale that have allowed the development of the productive forces and the increase of relative surplus value. Seen from this perspective, it becomes understandable that and how the 'technologically advanced sectors of the world-system have increased the rate of exploitation of its own workers [...] by simultaneously increasing the rate of net imports of resources from elsewhere' (Hornborg 2019, 80). The intermediate products and raw materials from other regions make (re)production cheaper; a large part of the added value in transnational corporations is created in the centres;

together with the structural, organisational and institutional power of the labour force, this enables relatively high wages, a well-developed public infrastructure and services of general interest.

The imperial mode of living implies a hierarchy on a global scale: Since the onset of colonialism, the working and living conditions in the economies of the global South, with their predominant forms of resource extraction, industrial or service production, have been largely geared to the economic needs of the capitalist centres. Domestic class, gender, and racialised relations are not exclusively, but essentially, oriented towards these needs. This is the core of the concept of the 'coloniality of power' developed by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000). The fact that Europe became the supposed centre of modernity is therefore due to a long historical process imbued with power that constituted certain forms of division and control of labour in the respective societies and on an international scale. In the course of colonisation, *race* became 'the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places and roles in the new society's structure of power' (ibid, 535) of the colonised countries. Hierarchical identities related to skin colour were created, and a 'systematic racial division of labour' was imposed (ibid, 536).⁵

The concept of the imperial mode of living sheds light on these dominant interdependencies both between the global South and the global North and within the societies concerned. Above all, it aims to show and explain how domination, power and violence are normalised in neo-colonial North-South relations, in class and gender relations, and by racialised relations in the practices of consumption and production, so that they are no longer perceived as such. The term is not intended to make the social contradictions *within* the global North and the global South disappear in favour of a seemingly superimposed imperialist North-South divide. Instead, the upper (and middle) classes of the global South have to be understood as important forces of the imperial mode of living (Landherr/Graf 2019). Not only do they tend to adopt, and benefit from, Northern patterns of consumption (see Myers and Kent 2004; OECD 2019) but as the dominant forces of their societies they also organise the extraction of resources or foster resource-intensive patterns of industrial development.

⁵ Georg Jochum (2016) has emphasized the connection between coloniality and work in an even more systematic manner than Quijano. Of course, this is not to deny the struggles in the colonized countries and the social forces fighting racism and capitalist exploitation. As Beverly Silver (2003) and Zhang Lu (2015) have pointed out, social conflicts follow the relocation of capital.

In the global North, the infrastructures of everyday life in areas such as food, transport, electricity, heat or telecommunication to a large extent rely on material flows from elsewhere, on the workers who extract the respective resources and on the ecological sinks on a global scale that absorb emissions produced through the operation of infrastructural systems. Workers in the global North draw on the latter not just because they consider them as components of a good life, but because they *depend* on them (cf. Lessenich 2019, 34). Mostly, it is not an individual choice that makes workers purchase cheap ‘food from nowhere’ (McMichael 2009), drive a car or light their homes with electricity that is generated by burning fossil fuels. Rather, they have to do so in order to nourish their families, to get to work or because the utility does not offer renewable alternatives. Thus, they are forced into the imperial mode of living simply because the latter is materialised and institutionalised in many of the life-sustaining systems of the global North.

Of course, capitalists are also forced by competition to socially and ecologically destructive practices – at least there is a strong incentive to do so which is due to the structural tendency of the capitalist mode of production to generate ‘negative externalities’ (Wright 2010, 59-60). Yet they assume a *dominant* position in this process. Workers who process raw materials extracted elsewhere in the production process, who use fossilist infrastructures (energy supply, automobility) or who produce mass consumer goods at high energy and material costs mostly do so because they lack alternatives, i.e. because they have nothing else, or less more,⁶ to sell but their own labour power. The buyers of this labour power equally benefit from its exploitation as well as from the exploitation of nature and labour power elsewhere in the world. In other words, workers participate in the imperial mode of living and reproduce it as *subalterns*.⁷ In addition, as consumers they benefit materially from this mode of living to a much lesser extent. Due to the quantity and the way of their consumption, they also produce and externalise lower socio-ecological costs than the middle and upper classes (Chancel and Piketty 2015).

⁶ Marcel van der Linden (2017, 36 ff.) has pointed to manifold forms the commodification of labour power can take, depending on the concrete spatial and historical context. Instead of only selling their labour power, workers might also possess certain tools, i.e. means of production, which they bring to work. They might also keep part of the products of their labour and sell them on their own authority.

⁷ We use the term ‘subalterns’ in a broad, i.e. Gramscian sense as opposed to the dominant classes of society. It thus also includes workers in capitalism.

Contradictions of the imperial mode of living in historical perspective

The workforce in the industrialising countries of the 19th and early 20th centuries experienced the health consequences of industrialisation at the workplace and in their residential areas much more than members of the middle and upper classes. On the consumption side, they were only marginally involved in the imperial mode of living. And, as shown by the example of sugar imported from the colonies, which acted as an energy supplier for the over-exploited workers (Osterhammel 2011, 338), their involvement was hardly for their own benefit. The workers' individual consumption, even of products based on colonial exploitation, was 'productive for the capitalist and the State, since it produces the power that creates their wealth' (Marx 1976 [1867], 719).

This did not preclude imperialist attitudes within the working class of the global North. According to Marcel van der Linden (2017, 310-311), these attitudes were particularly pronounced in the British and the US trade union federations, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). After the First World War, both organisations closely cooperated with their governments in order to develop labour guidelines for the colonies and to make the latter's unions following a reformist path. Later on, during the Cold War, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, that was dominated by the TUC and the AFL(-CIO), was considered an instrument of (neo-)colonialism in the countries of the global South.

The emergence of a fossil energy regime made it possible to extend some of the benefits of the imperial mode of living to larger parts of the working class, too. As long as this regime was based on the use of coal, its production facilities and infrastructures were highly centralised and thus susceptible to disruptions and strikes. The workers were able to use targeted actions to withhold from society the products necessary for its reproduction, i.e. to interrupt the energy supply. Their *production power* thus increased, while at the same time their *organisational power* was enhanced by their spatial concentration in vertically integrated large-scale factories and the extractive industry. As Timothy Mitchell (2011) and Michelle Williams (2018) have argued, the working class used its increased power as a lever in the struggle for political and social rights. Thus, after World War II these rights were expanded throughout the countries of the global North.

This link between production power and energy source weakened with the increasing importance of oil as the central energetic resource of Fordism; extraction and transport became more

capital-intensive, and the spatially extensive network of storage facilities, pipelines and tanker fleets was far less vulnerable to labour struggles than the infrastructures of the coal-based energy regime. However, petroleum revolutionised the *mode of living* of the working class (Wissen 2016, 50-51): A petroleum-based norm of consumption emerged, which enabled unprecedented increases of prosperity and tied workers more closely than ever before to capitalism and its growth logic through the individual possession or consumption of goods from mass production (cf. Aglietta 1979, 152-169). The availability of cheap oil became a crucial moment in the reproduction of the working class. 'Petroleum not only was the material basis for countless products themselves (e.g., plastics, clothing, and medicine), but also its centrality as transportation fuel ensured that even if products were not made with petroleum, they were distributed and consumed via petroleum-based modes of mobility' (Huber 2013, 180-181).

The societal generalisation of the imperial mode of living as a structural condition, which in the early stages of industrial capitalism was limited to productive consumption and the (luxury) consumption of the upper classes, was accompanied by an intensification of ecological problems, due to the significant increase of natural resource extraction a fossil fuel combustion. Will Steffen et al. (2011) call this phase the 'Great Acceleration' (of commodity production and the respective use of resources and related environmental problems). Furthermore, the societal generalisation of the imperial mode of living went hand in hand with neo-colonial domination over the countries which had been decolonised in the 19th and 20th century. Finally, patriarchal gender relations were perpetuated for example by the car-centred spatial structure of suburbanisation, which made it almost impossible to combine wage labour and reproductive work.

The famous dictum by Marx (1976 [1867], 638) that capitalist production is 'undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker', thus needs to be modified to the effect that the undermining of the living conditions of workers in the global North, i.e. the socio-ecological contradiction of capitalism, was superimposed by the access to cheap nature and labour power in the global South as well as by the unpaid reproductive labour of women in the global North itself.⁸ The Fordist class compromise therefore also rested on a patriarchal and colonial global and social order, which was essential for processing the class contradiction in the global North. Whereas the imperial mode of living has always been both an imperative *and* a promise, a constraint *and* an expansion of opportunities, with Fordism the enabling elements

⁸ See Benjamin Selwyn's paper.

gained importance for workers in the global North (Brand and Wissen 2021, chapters 3 and 4; Brand and Wissen 2018). However, a glance at the living and working conditions in the coal and steel regions and industrial centres of Fordist capitalism shows that the increases in prosperity were only the other side of environmental pollution, which was particularly detrimental to the health of workers and their families (Barca and Leonardi 2018).

Deepening and new contradictions of the imperial mode of living

Today there are clear signs that what Alain Lipietz (2000) diagnosed as the ‘family similarity’ of social and ecological contradictions and movements is once again coming to the fore. Although the promise of an imperial mode of living for material prosperity still carries a strong global and cross-class appeal, to many its redeemability is becoming increasingly questionable. Thus, it is crucial to understand the destruction of nature and that of the worker as interrelated parts of the same social relationships of power and domination (Hürtgen 2020).

On the one hand, this is due to the rising social inequality in the global North, which, in contrast to Fordism, makes it impossible for more and more poorer people to access the material benefits of the imperial mode of living to an extent that is even roughly comparable to that of the middle and upper classes.⁹ On the other hand, the North-South conflict over participation in the imperial mode of living has intensified, as can be seen not least in the recent refugee and migration movements.¹⁰ The latter demonstrate that an ever-increasing number of people from the global South are no longer prepared to let their lives be destroyed by the externalisation effects of the imperial mode of living of the global North and instead aspire to participate in the conveniences of this mode of living themselves. Another symptom is the economic rise of countries like China and India and the resulting spatial expansion of the patterns of production and consumption that constitute the imperial mode of living. The industrialising countries themselves have now become dependent on an outside source from which they obtain raw materials, the working

⁹ The fact that more and more people are locked in the framework of the imperial mode of living and appealed by its ongoing attractiveness and at the same time are deprived of the capacities to benefit from it in the same way as they were used to can be seen as one of the root-causes of the rise of the social and political right (see below and Dörre et al. 2018; Sauer et al. 2018).

¹⁰ Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon, because it refers to, for example, people who temporarily migrate within Europe in order to achieve a higher income in other countries, but also to people who have to flee under life-threatening circumstances (cf. Lang 2017).

capacity which they can access, and to which they can shift their socio-ecological costs.¹¹ They are thus becoming competitors to the early industrialised countries of the global North, not only economically but also ecologically. As a result, the eco-imperial tensions intensify, leading to fierce competition for raw materials and sinks.

The guiding principles, policies and everyday practices dominating in the global North, their diffusion into the global South and the demands for participation, which for many can only be realised through flight or migration, show that the imperial mode of living is still an attractive possibility and promise. However, the aggravation of crisis phenomena such as climate change and the increasing conflicts around the world over CO₂-sinks and fossil, metallic and agricultural raw materials leave little room for doubt that the promise can only be fulfilled in an ever more exclusionary and exclusive manner. This applies not only in geographical terms, i.e. in the North-South relationship, but also in social terms, i.e. within the global North itself. The more the eco-imperial tensions that result from the generalisation of the non-generalisable intensify, the more the ecological upheavals in the centres will also become apparent in economic and social terms (Dörre/Becker 2018).

The Corona pandemic can also be seen in the context of the contradictions that become manifest with the generalisation of the imperial mode of living. This applies both to its causation and to its consequences. Although its outbreak zones might be locally identifiable, a comprehensive understanding of the disease requires taking into account the unequal exchange within the 'relational geographies' which have been created by global capital circuits. Agro-industrial business is particularly important here. Its extractivist activities contribute to destroying natural habitats through deforestation, thus fostering the zoonotic emergence of diseases that are then distributed through global value chains. Driven by, and driving, socio-ecologically destructive consumption patterns, 'commodity agriculture serves as both propulsion for and nexus through which pathogens of diverse origins migrate from the most remote reservoirs to the most international of population centers' (Wallace et al. 2020). Here they often encounter strong social inequalities which, in turn, are strengthened by them (Davis 2020).

11 China, for instance, is shifting ecological costs in form of greenhouse gas emissions to other countries as part of the 'New Silk Road' project. See the instructive essay by Federico Demaria and Joan Martinez-Alier (2017). The authors point out that in the course of this project Chinese companies have already invested in 240 coal-fired power plants and thus contributed to spatially shifting environmental damage and conflicts. See also Hoering (2018).

Countering the increasingly manifest contradictions of the imperial mode of living mainly by an *ecological modernisation*¹² falls short – although it is without doubt preferable to the authoritarian solutions which have become so popular precisely because they deny the environmental crisis and promise an exclusive and exclusionary stabilisation of the imperial mode of living. Ecological modernisation strategies address the energetic and material basis of capitalism, but not its political economy and its inherent growth logic (Altvater 1996; Rilling 2011), i.e. they leave the ‘structural unsustainability’ (Sommer and Welzer 2014, 37 and chapter 4) of the capitalist mode of production intact. Therefore, they will hardly be able to decouple economic growth entirely from resource consumption and environmental impact (Wiedmann et al. 2013). In a ‘green’ capitalist economy, the externalisation logic of the imperial mode of living is unlikely to be overcome but rather will be shifted to other areas, e.g. to metals, which are becoming increasingly important in comparison to fossil fuels (see, e.g., Exner et al. 2015; Groneweg et al. 2017). Moreover, the *green jobs* envisaged in the relevant modernisation strategies are often of a poor quality, particularly those held by women. Their proponents hardly raise issues like the reduction in working hours and the need to overcome the gendered division of labour (Littig 2018, 567-569).

Just transition and international solidarity

Against the false promises of an ecological modernisation of capitalism, it remains a crucial challenge to develop strategies that question the prevailing patterns of production and consumption much more fundamentally and put an end to the imperatives of growth associated with the capitalist mode of dynamic stabilisation (cf. Rosa 2019). In this context, the concept of a *just transition* has gained prominence. It originates in trade union discussions of the 1990s, became part of the programme of the International Labour Organisation in 2015, and, in the same year, entered the preamble of the Paris climate agreement (see Stevis and Felli 2015; Sweeney and Treat 2018). The just transition concept addresses the socio-ecological contradictions that have recently become manifest, i.e. the fact that even in the global North the ecological question and the policies of mitigation and adaptation have an important social and labour-related dimension. Depending on its concrete conceptualisation however, the concept

¹² See e.g. the ‘green economy’ initiative of UNEP (2011) and the concept of a ‘European Green Deal’ (European Commission 2019).

also runs danger to reproduce the contradictions between labour and ecology instead of overcoming them. This is the case when the immediate threat for workers is not seen in the environmental destruction and the climate crisis itself, but in ‘the possible effects that *measures against* environmental destruction will have on workers and their jobs.’ (Räthzel and Uzzell 2019, 156). Examples include the discussions about a phase-out of lignite mining in Germany; the above-cited reactions of representatives from the German metal workers’ union to the non-inclusion of cars driven by fossil fuels into the government’s stimulus package; and the policy of the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) in South Africa that ‘is increasingly defensive of the interests of some 90 000 coal miners in the face of the threats of job losses from mine closures, falling coal prices (sixty per cent since 2012), mechanisation, demands from environmental activists to “keep the coal in the hole” and the divestment movement’ (Cock 2018, 222-223).

Without doubt, workers and trade unions worldwide face a severe dilemma when the necessity of a phase-out or a radical transformation of whole branches becomes irrefutable. This applies particularly to such situations where the branches in question (like coal and automobility) constitute the base of a union’s organisational power. Nevertheless, even in these cases it is crucial not to reduce workers to their role of job-holders and underestimate their potentials as critical members of society who furthermore dispose over the knowledge and the competences that are indispensable for addressing the ecological crisis.¹³ In the past, these potentials were mobilised particularly in times of progressive social mobilisations, like in the course of 1968. The social movements that drove these mobilisations or emerged out of them created resonances on the shop floors where workers started to discuss the pressing problems of society and their potential contributions to overcoming them. Sometimes, as in the case of Lucas Aerospace, the threat of massive job losses fostered debates and experiments of an alternative, no longer profit- and competition driven, but use-value oriented production.

Today, there could be a chance to build on this progressive heritage of the working class and to create links between labour struggles in a more narrow sense and wider social struggles which aim at tackling issues like racism and climate change and around which new social movements have more recently emerged. There is, of course, no necessity for such links. However, the progressive mobilisations in many parts of the world point to the possibilities to create them strategically. Critical research can play an important role in this respect: it reveals the historical

¹³ There is long tradition of sociological research on this. See e.g. Heine and Mautz (1989) and Warsewa (2016) for an overview.

experiences on which today's movements can draw; it shows to which extent the alternatives pursued in past conflicts can orientate the struggles in the present; it throws light on how different groups of workers in various socio-spatial contexts perceive the current upheavals; and it contributes to develop concepts that make radical alternatives become tangible today – the left approaches to a Green New Deal being one of them.¹⁴

Thinking and acting in this direction would mean a radicalisation of the just transition concept.¹⁵ The latter then would no longer be sparked mainly by the unequal distribution of the costs that are caused by *fighting the ecological crisis* but by the unequal distribution of the much higher costs of the *environmental crisis itself* (Barca and Leonardi 2018, 489-90). This would be a necessary precondition for a transformation that is neither carried out on the back of workers in the global North nor shifts its burdens to nature, the global South, unpaid reproductive labour and future generations.

A socio-ecological transformation in a strong sense would ground in a specific notion of international solidarity. Beside the 'explicit' solidarity Marcel van der Linden refers to in his paper, overcoming the imperial mode of living requires an 'implicit' or de facto solidarity, rooted in social structures and everyday practices of production and consumption that do no longer undermine the living conditions of people elsewhere and in the future. We have called this 'solidary mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021, chapter 8). It is essentially about creating technological and social infrastructures that assure well-being not at the expense of others and nature through fundamentally transforming the social and international division of labour, reducing drastically the use of resources and emissions of greenhouse gases and stopping the production and trade of commodities which are not sustainable in socio-environmental terms. Concrete elements of a solidary mode of living, which are already present or at the heart of social conflicts worldwide, are: regionally produced and consumed renewable energy (and the overall reduction of energy consumption), regional and ecological agriculture instead of the industrial and world market-driven one, public transport (at best, delivered with infrastructures and means of transport that are also produced under socially and environmentally acceptable conditions) increasingly replacing the automobility-centred mobility system etc. Solidarity, this is the experience of the welfare state (as a principle, not as its bureaucratic realisation), needs to be

¹⁴ See e.g. the respective discussions on <https://www.jacobinmag.com/series/green-new-deal>.

¹⁵ Sweeney and Treat (2018) discuss this as the 'social power' in contrast to the 'social dialogue' approach to just transition and provide examples for it.

institutionalised, provided with durability that unburdens the individuals at an everyday level. Internationalism under conditions of globalised capitalism is the struggle for the radical restructuring of the own living conditions and the willingness of the masses to live differently or, again with Gramsci, to accept and practically live an attractive and viable solidary mode of living as the material core of a post-capitalist and post-imperial mode of production and living.

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