

Climate Connections

BY GJEP | JANUARY 13, 2010 · 7:18 PM

MICHELLE MASCARENHAS-SWAN: A Window to a New World

[Our Window](#)

In December, a delegation of racial, economic, and environmental justice organizers went to Copenhagen for the UN Climate Negotiations. They were there fighting for real solutions to the crises that capitalism has created in poor communities around the world. The “Copenhagen moment” must now rapidly become the “people’s moment” if we are to win a just transition to a new world. Left values and vision will be essential in leading us out of the ecological crises we’re in. And taking on this mission can take the Left out of the defensive and reactive stance that we’ve been pushed into over the last few decades into a proactive and visionary approach towards leading the transition to a new world.

It’s clear that the world has entered a period of drastic transition.

After two-hundred years of industrial-scale, increasingly globalized capitalism, we have been catapulted into a set of interlocking ecological crises of food, water, climate, waste and toxics and of biological and cultural diversity. In particular, the past two hundred years of mining fossil fuels from deep in the ground and spewing them into the atmosphere has [drastically impacted the earth’s climate systems](#).

What we heard Al Gore tell us in “An Inconvenient Truth” three years ago has gotten [drastically worse](#); tipping points have been breached and multiplier effects are taking effect.

In an [interview](#) with Democracy Now in Copenhagen, Bolivian President Evo Morales laid it bare. “Capitalism is the worst enemy of humanity. Capitalism—and I’m speaking about irrational development—policies of unlimited industrialization are what destroys the environment. And that irrational industrialization is capitalism. So as long as we don’t review or revise those policies, it’s impossible to attend to humanity and life.”

The internal logic of capitalism pushes it to continue to keep growing exponentially on a finite planet, even if it has not found a way to do that with pushing us towards a breaking point.

History shows us that a key question in these moments of transition is who has the power to lead. The nature of the economic and social reorganization that we need in the face of these impending crises will depend entirely on who is politically positioned to lead that reorganization. It is not at all inevitable that the next world system will inherently be “better” in terms of social progress.

Actually, it's not hard to imagine that the world will become increasingly militarized and that the rich will plunder the resource wealth of the global south while the poor are pushed to further plunder the earth in order to survive.

In fact, the Obama administration tried to buy off third world governments into accepting that kind of path at the UN Climate talks in Copenhagen in December 2009. We had a chance to win a unified agreement towards reducing global emissions. In Copenhagen, most third world governments & social movements came together to call for a deal that would allow the poor and working-classes of the world to survive and have the resources to adapt. But the U.S. and other wealthy nations sought to balance the [climate debt](#) on the backs of poor farmers and slum dwellers in Africa and Asia.

We'll get one more chance to win a fair deal at the end of 2010 in Mexico City where the next round of [negotiations](#) is scheduled to take place. But we are going to need to build more power to win a fair deal during those talks.

What does that mean for our work in the United States? A forward-looking Social Movement Left should work to provide key leadership in this period. So far, we're way behind in taking on the ecological crises and responding to fact that climate change is requiring a whole new policy framework. City, regional, and state governments are already developing climate action plans (OCAC) and developing policies about how to parcel up new funding related to carbon fees. If we don't build up our own ecological justice vision and strategy, we'll be left simply fighting the false solutions like [cap and trade](#) or [biofuels](#).

And we'll continue to be small and demoralized.

Instead, we need to connect across issues and constituencies. We shouldn't drop any of our issues; instead we need to add a "climate" lens that can help us develop the type of systemic analysis and transformative vision that a serious left should be providing to our social movements.

Reimagining: Towards a World of Many Worlds

Our challenge today is to re-write the story of the kind of victory that we're fighting for. Our new story needs to be believable, irresistible, and worth fighting for.

The finale of the story of our victory will be a post-globalized world based on local democracies, driven to meet residents needs in an equitable way and deeply rooted in a relationship to ecological place. It will be a world where many worlds fit, where there are a million different solutions to the question of how we should meet our needs and a million different forms of local participatory economies that emerge to meet these needs.

So, if that's the finale of the story that we're working towards, how does the plot unfold over the chapters in the story where we shift out of our current fossil fuel-driven, industrial growth-driven world that is rooted in exploitation and oppression and into this world that makes space for many different liberatory worlds? What are our central tasks towards winning that transition?

First, we need to cultivate an ecological sense rooted in our land-based traditions. We need to learn with and from Indigenous & land-based people's ways of knowing. This includes asking and listening to our living ancestors and elders and to new immigrants in our communities. We need to draw upon the laws of nature: symbiosis, limits, cycles, balance, zero waste. And we need to cultivate a reflective, responsive relationship to place. We shouldn't call

for going “back to the land;” we should build a “take back the land” movement.

Second, we need to work towards a transition that quickly shifts us out of a green capitalism agenda towards a [resilience agenda](#) by winning local equitable control of resources and by investing in the work required to shift us from a “get mine” to a “share ours” world. This means shifting from “green hard hats” to “green roles.”

Our stance in carrying it this story needs to be solution-oriented and hope-based. In this moment of insecurity, a social movement left has a real chance to win over key social forces in winning a just transition to a new world, but we need a proactive vision to make that possible.

Solutions from the Land and Our Histories as Land-Based People

For too long, the Social Movement Left has equated “environmentalism” with white, privileged hippies or plush non-profit junkies. And consequently, with the brave exception of the environmental justice movement, environmental work has been mostly given over to those kinds of folks. But our communities have historical relationship to the land that we must reclaim in order to take back the land. This doesn’t mean going “back to the land” but instead, laying down roots with a right relationship to the places we live.

The connection of most working-class people of color to our own lands was severed by colonialism, slavery or forced migration. We have the right and the responsibility to reclaim the knowledge of our ancestors and to draw upon the worldviews of the indigenous and land-based peoples who have survived to this day. All of our peoples — immigrants people of African descent, people still in the global south — are originally land-based people. Before capitalism, the ancestors of most white people also worked the land that their ancestors had lived on for generations in Europe.

Reclaiming the teachings and the lessons from our ancestors is not about “going back” to those ways. It is about evolving them into new kinds of knowledge and new ways of being that can serve as our new tools for survival. When we talk about cultural diversity, we need to be talking about an evolved knowledge of place and the importance of cultural beliefs and practices in connecting our different peoples with the places we have evolved to inhabit.

Today, the reality is that – with the exception of indigenous people – we are all now far from our ancestral homelands, and we have built our lives in cities and towns we now call home. Our traditions are rooted in lands that are far from where we ended up laying down new roots. This is a contradiction that we must work towards resolving in dialogue with native people.

In order for humans to survive on a post-globalized planet, wherever we live, each of us must cultivate a reflective, responsive relationship to that place. We can learn from the laws of nature: symbiosis, limits, cycles, balance, zero waste. And we need to spend a lot of time observing and learning about where we live in order to live there sustainably.

There are many points to be worked through related to our displacement and re-settling from one part of the earth to another but we can start by repairing and reclaiming our own relationship to the land, learning basic principles of ecology, and evolving our knowledge of place in dialogue with its native peoples.

Shifting from “Get Mine” to “Share Ours”

Another central task is to win the infrastructure that helps move us from a “get mine” world to a “share ours” world.

[Grace Lee Boggs](#), for example, talks about a (r)evolution for self-determination.

One key step in this process will be winning a new world framework that gives communities local control over resources. Ultimately, this is what we want to win through the UN climate negotiations process that is moving from Copenhagen to Mexico City in November 2010.

We need to win the decentralization and democratization of the control of resources: food, water, land and energy. Communities require these resources in order to begin fostering the local, living and participatory economies that will move us off the catastrophic trajectory that we are now on.

A second key step towards a world driven by sharing resources will be shifting from a “green growth” to a “green needs” economic agenda. In the U.S., we consume 18 times more resources in our daily lives than do people in India; we simply cannot continue to live in the ways we’re living. To begin with, we will need to live more compactly and cooperatively.

As people begin live more densely and cooperatively, we will need more peer counselors, facilitators, organizers, mediators, and educators to help reweave the fabric of our communities. We need to restore our ability to communicate and work together, nurturing the means for democratic systems on a human community level. We’ll need the capacity to relate to each other, organize ourselves, make the decisions that affect our lives and our world, and work together to get things done. This means that we need to fight for compensation for the meaningful work that sustains people and places, rather than just fighting for “green jobs” in a growth-driven capitalist economy.

Shifting the debate to focus on meeting people’s real needs—materially but also on social and emotional levels—will be critical to winning a just transition. Some of the most crucial green roles will be therapists, healers, coaches, mediators, teachers, organizers, and facilitators as well as bus drivers, farmers, greywater plumbers, and repair people.

So, as a Left, we need to move the debate from green construction sites to kitchen tables. That means that we need to value social labor and the invisible work of weaving community – which is mostly done by women – more visible.

Strategy

So far – with the exception of groups like the Indigenous Environmental Network, Kentuckians For the Commonwealth and other environmental justice forces – the social movement left has been largely absent from climate or other ecological justice debates. It’s as if the system has created so many little fires for us to fight in our distinct organizations, issue sectors, and communities that we’re missing the tidal wave that is about to hit. We need a canopy-level view of the crises that capitalism has created.

We need a strategy of building movements and communities of resistance, resilience, and reimagining. We can do this wherever we are – through our housing, immigration rights, or economic justice struggles – by weaving in new frames and organizing models that build on our people’s wisdoms, gather up critical resources, and spark imaginations.

There are exciting examples of this happening around the country that we can learn from. These are the seeds of what we might call “Liberated Zones,” spaces where community members take control of their local resources and begin to

shift to more cooperative modes of meeting needs. This is an important way to break out of the hegemony that boxes us in.

In Detroit, local organizers and residents have been [reclaiming abandoned lots](#) for gardens as a way to provide for local needs while taking control of local resources and the land. Meanwhile, developers are looking at that same resource as a mine for a new wave of green growth. In Detroit, private developers have already invested at least \$30 million buying up vacant property to [convert large areas back to agriculture](#). The moment of transition is upon us and if a coordinated Social Movement Left doesn't act fast to reclaim resources for the [common good](#), those resources will just shift hands and continue to be exploited for profit-generation at the increasing expense of the poor.

In San Francisco, [POWER](#) is adding an ecological lens to its work building organized power amongst working-class communities of color. The organization has steadily begun shifting from solely fighting against green-washing of dirty development to taking a proactive and visionary approach to winning. Having learned that the SF Unified School District is the largest landholder in the city, POWER is working towards winning rights to use schoolyards for farmers' markets, gardens, community meeting spaces, and more.

These experiments in places like Detroit and San Francisco can help write a new story in which the people reclaim the commons and begin to forge local, living, participatory economies. In fostering economic and ecological justice in liberated zones, people can also begin to name and heal the spiritual and emotional crises created by oppression and exploitation. Gardens, for example, can become places to heal emotional wounds as well as learn to foster healthy working relationships.

Conclusion

The social movement left can garner immense strength from this moment. We have the chance to birth a new politic that can re-inspire Left activists to see themselves as architects of a new world, a self-conception that we have been missing since the 1960s.

If we fail to reorient our organizations and movements to win this new world, we risk a nightmarish sci-fi future of ever-increasing militarization, inequality, and genocide.

In Copenhagen, G77 chair Lumumba Stanislaus Di-aping helped to unite much of the global south to reject the catastrophic deal that the rich nations wanted. Presidents Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez then helped to frame the possibilities of uniting around an anti-capitalist vision: the only way to actually cut greenhouse gas emissions to head off the worst effects of climate chaos.

As Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said, "Copenhagen is not the end, I repeat, but a beginning: the doors have been opened for a universal debate on how to save the planet, life on the planet. The battle continues."

Many of the ideas and frames contained in this article (but not its errors) come out of the collective brain of Movement Generation.

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