

CHAPTER 5: Overcoming Eurocentrism: From geopolitics towards global ecological justice

Modern capitalist societies are facing an ‘economic-ecological pincer crisis’.¹ If economic growth, measured as increasing GDP, falls or fails to materialise, social hardship increases, while, if growth materialises, ecological problems such as global warming and biodiversity loss, accelerate. Despite claims to the contrary, the European Green Deal (EGD) does not amount to a strategy that resolves this pincer.

5.1 Facts about the ecological aspects of global polycrisis

Carbon emissions from fossil fuels hit a record high globally in 2024. The Global Carbon Budget projects fossil carbon dioxide emissions of 37.4 billion tons in 2024, up 0.8 percent from 2023.² With projected emissions from land-use change (like deforestation) of 4.2 billion tons, total CO₂ emissions are estimated to be 41.6 billion tons in 2024, up from 40.6 billion tons 2023. NATO’s 2023 military spending accounted for 233 million tCO₂, an increase of 15 percent.³ The last time a similar level of CO₂ concentrations prevailed, 3–5 million years ago, the Earth’s temperature was 2–3°C less and the sea level 10–20m higher.⁴ Furthermore, methane concentrations – responsible for 30 percent of global warming – have risen faster in the last five years than at any time since recordings started.

Atmospheric concentrations of methane are now more than 2.6 times higher than in pre-industrial times, about two-thirds of which is due to an increase in methane emissions from human activities: fossil fuel extraction and use, agriculture, decomposition of food and organic waste in landfills.⁵ Thirdly, nature-related risks like pollution, damage to water systems, soil erosion and the threat of disease are just as damaging to the economy as those resulting from climate risks.⁶ Due to overexploitation and climate change, the Amazon,

¹ Gronemann, J. (2024, April). *Drei Fragen an Klaus Dörre: Warum gegen die Zangenkrise nur Klimagerechtigkeit hilft.* Mein GrundEinkommen. <https://www.mein-grundeinkommen.de/magazin/klimagerechtigkeit-klaus-doerre>

² ESSD (2024, November). *Global Carbon Budget 2024.* <https://essd.copernicus.org/preprints/essd-2024-519/>; University of Exeter (2024, November). *Global Carbon Emissions Hit Record High in 2024 – Are We out of Time?* <https://scitechdaily.com/global-carbon-emissions-hit-record-high-in-2024-are-we-out-of-time/>; United Nations Environment Programme (2024, October). *Emissions Gap Report 2024.* <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2024>

³ The global military expenditure increased by 6.8% and reached a record high of \$2443 billion. SIPRI (2024, April). *Fact Sheet, Trends in World Military Expenditure.* <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2023>

⁴ World Meteorological Organization (2024, March). *State of the Global Climate 2023.* <https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-global-climate-2023>

⁵ Natur.de (2024, September). *Methan-Emissionen steigen so stark wie nie.* <https://www.wissenschaft.de/erde-umwelt/methan-emissionen-steigen-so-stark-wie-nie/>

⁶ Inman, P. & Partington, R. (2024, April). *Nature destruction will cause bigger economic slump in UK than 2008 crisis, experts warn.* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/25/nature-destruction-will-cause-bigger-economic-slump-in-uk-than-2008-crisis-experts-warn>

Canadian (and probably Russian) boreal forests are turning from a carbon sink to a major source of carbon emissions⁷, and wildlife populations have seen an average decline of 73 percent from 1970 to 2020⁸. While in 2009, three Planetary Boundaries had been crossed, four had been in 2015 and six out of nine in 2023. When one adds to this the social, economic, resource and geopolitical aspects of polycrisis⁹, it is evident that we are facing a perfect storm.

5.2 The need to overcome Eurocentric green growth strategies

To free themselves from the economic-ecological pincer, societies that industrialised early, such as those of the EU, must overcome the compulsion for constant economic growth and switch to a type of economic development oriented towards the requirements of sustainable reproduction of society, that is, a caring economy. Such a caring economy is not profit-driven but focusses on a needs-based approach¹⁰. This means that social care must be decoupled from economic growth. Furthermore, and crucially, attempts to constitute a 'green capitalism' of which the EGD is symptomatic do not address global inequalities in the highly unequal overuse of natural resources and sinks. Indeed, they are based on such inequalities. These phenomena are a heritage of uneven development under capitalism and colonialism. Their perpetuation is related to neocolonialism, imperialism and Eurocentrism and constantly reproduces these global asymmetries within global hierarchies.

We understand Eurocentrism as a way of thinking and acting that structurally places the Europeans' own interests above the interests of the people in economically weaker countries reproducing hierarchies in international relations and structures. The EGD, EU policy in general and the strategies proposed in the Letta and Draghi Reports, the Strategic Agenda of the European Council, the Political Guidelines of the President of the European Commission are symptomatic of such a Eurocentric perspective. At the core of these strategies usually stand deregulation, protection of investment and intellectual property rights and competition policies to strengthen the EU's position in hierarchical international

⁷ Byrne, M., Boos, W. & Hu, S. (2024). Elevation-dependent warming: observations, models, and energetic mechanisms. *Weather Climate Dynamics*, 5, pp. 763–777. <https://doi.org/10.5194/wcd-5-763-2024>

⁸ Ritchie, H. & Spooner, F. (2024, October). *The 2024 Living Planet Index reports a 73% average decline in wildlife populations — what's changed since the last report?* <https://ourworldindata.org/2024-living-planet-index>

⁹ For instance, the first two years of the Ukraine war caused emissions of 175 million tCO₂e - more than the annual GHG emissions of the Netherlands, putting 90 million new petrol cars on the road, or building 260 coal-fired power units of 200 MW each. In: Initiative on GHG accounting of war [de Klerk L, S. M., Gassan-zade O, Korthuis A, Zibtsev S, Myroniuk V, Soshenskyi, O, Vasylyshyn R, Krakovska S, Kryshtop L]. (2024, June). *Climate Damage Caused by 24 months of War in the Ukraine*. <https://ukrainet.eu/2024/06/30/report-climate-damage-caused-by-russian-war-in-ua/>

¹⁰ Spangenberg, J. H., & Lorek, S. (2022). Who cares (for whom)? *Frontiers in Sustainability*, 3, 835295. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2022.835295>; Lorek, S. (2024, September). *Care work in a sustainability perspective*. Presented at the 30th EuroMemo Group conference, Vienna. <https://euromemo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Care-for-EuroMemo-Group.pdf>

relations. As already argued in chapter 2, this not only brings us closer to ecological collapse; it also increases global geopolitical tensions.

The Global North, including EU member states, have devastated the global environment and contributed by far the most to global warming. The richest account for an extremely large share of global carbon emissions. Of the global population, the top 1 percent by income causes more than twice as much carbon emissions as the bottom 50 percent. Also, within European countries the differences are enormous.¹¹ In a global perspective pushing for green growth in Europe may aggravate these problems. The reason is that key resources for green capitalism are extracted from the Global South ('green extractivism'), and resource mining and processing contribute to some 90 percent of all global biodiversity loss.¹² To be sustainable, the level and pattern of production and resource consumption in a country has to be generalisable. The European level and pattern, including that projected by the EGD, can not be extended globally because of the world's limited resources and sinks. What is needed instead is an economic and social model in Europe that effectively aligns economic security, social well-being, peace, and preservation or recovery of the biosphere not only for Europeans, but affecting the whole earth population

5.3 The debate on legitimate reparation demands¹³

As recognised by the repeated calls for compensation for the ecological debt owed by the rich countries, and in particular their climate debt¹⁴, most recently discussed at the Baku COP29 in 2024, environmental injustice has deep historical roots. The issue of legitimate reparation demands is connected to the idea of unequal exchange which was, in Samir Amin's framing, based upon differential surplus extraction from poor and rich countries dating back to the slave trade.¹⁵ He was also a critic of the ongoing extraction of non-renewable natural resources, causing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions and depending on and exploiting migrant labour in the mines, and typically depending upon unpaid women's role in social reproduction. While emphasising that the ecological debt has many components like dumping of toxic waste, free disposal of gas residues (carbon dioxide, CFCs), biodiversity destruction, embodied exports of nutrients and water, the appropriation of genetic resources ('biopiracy'), etc., Joan Martínez Alier has concluded that it is not

¹¹ Oxfam International (2023, November). *Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/climate-equality-a-planet-for-the-99-621551/>

¹² UNEP IRP, et al. (2019). *Global Resources Outlook 2019: Natural Resources for the Future We Want*. IRP Reports. Nairobi, Kenya, UNEP United Nations Environment Programme. <https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook-2019>

¹³ On the basis of: Bond, P. (2024). *Legitimate Reparations Demands for African Societies Suffering Unequal Ecological Exchange: Class, race, gender, generational justice and the pitfalls of resource-national consciousness* (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁴ Martínez Alier, J. (2002). *Ecological Debt and Property Rights on Carbon Sinks and Reservoirs*. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 13(1), pp. 115-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/104557502101245404>

¹⁵ Amin, S. (2018). *Modern imperialism, monopoly finance capital, and Marx's law of value: monopoly capital and Marx's law of value*. NYU Press; Amin, S. (2019). *The long revolution of the global south: Toward a new anti-imperialist international*. Monthly Review Press.

possible to make an exact account¹⁶. While advocates of green growth decoupling strategies suggest that such impacts can be mitigated, there is little in current strategies such as the EGD to indicate that that is the case.

In consequence, there are good reasons to support the anti-extractivist approach taken by many civil society organisations in the Global South. They agree that some mining will remain necessary, but demand that first contemporary consumption levels need to be 'degrown'. They typically support micro-struggles that can periodically be brought together in coalitions, such as the 'Right to Say No!' movement to leave minerals underground (supported by the Alternative Information and Development Centre), the Mining Affected Communities United in Action, or the network Women against Destructive Extraction (WoMin).

5.4 Conclusions: Overcoming Eurocentrism – towards global environmental justice

The gap between what is required to protect the environment in a socially sustainable manner and what has been achieved has not only widened, but opportunities for actual problem-solving and socially and environmentally sustainable development have dwindled. If steps were taken in the right direction, they came too late, were inconsistent and without sufficient financial support. Although economic growth measured in GDP has been proven to destroy people's natural livelihoods and their natural environment, it remains the central goal of EU policies, as well as being embedded in the prevailing structures. Economic and social well-being continues to be dependent on permanent growth. Overcoming Eurocentrism implies that future European policies are geared towards avoiding an environmental collapse in a socially just and solidaristic manner¹⁷. This includes a drastic reduction of climate-damaging emissions, pollution and the overexploitation of the biosphere, as well as social and environmental justice domestically and internationally. This means a profound dismantling and re-organisation of existing production and reproductive structures and the establishment of processes that are necessary for global environmental justice. While doing this, the demands of indigenous peoples should be recognised and the transformation towards a caring economy should be supported¹⁸. It presupposes giving up the focus on an ever-growing GDP as a goal in itself.

¹⁶ Martinez Alier, J. (2003, September). *Marxism, Social Metabolism and Ecologically Unequal Exchange*, Paper presented at Lund University Conference on World Systems Theory and the Environment.

¹⁷ See also: European Environmental Bureau (2024, November). *CSO Joint Statement: The EU Commission must provide guarantees on climate, nature, and public health, ensuring the protection of people*. <https://eeb.org/library/cso-joint-statement-the-eu-commission-must-provide-guarantees-on-climate-nature-and-public-health-ensuring-the-protection-of-people/>

¹⁸ Gusman, R. A. (2024, September). *Archiving Ancestral Knowledge to Co-Create New Economic Paradigms Lessons from the Mapuche peoples and landscapes of Chile*. <https://medium.com/postgrowth/mapuche-landscapes-unveiled-archiving-ancestral-knowledge-for-tomorrows-community-economies-b2d02e33d088>; Lamas, I., Barca, S., Ferreira, B. S., & Yanez, I. (2021). Ecofeminist Horizons. *Ambiente & Sociedade*, 24, e0153.

The ecological debt cannot be monetised and repaid, but it is, however, a powerful argument for a policy shift away from Eurocentrism towards global responsibility and environmental justice. Beyond compensatory 'regret payments', e.g. for climate adaptation, loss & damage, and emergency relief, from former colonial powers, this calls for supporting the Global South by transforming the global trade regime, the use of resources and the financial structures to provide social and environmental justice.¹⁹ This includes cancellation of illegitimate debt, development of the knowledge commons, emergency relief, and rewilding. Most importantly, this must go hand in hand with a transformation of the European economic model through overcoming the green growth orientation. Instead, a needs-based model of a caring economy that is potentially extendable globally to guarantee a good life for all, should be the basis for achieving global environmental justice.

¹⁹ Schmelzer, M., & Nowshin, T. (2023). Ecological reparations and degrowth: Towards a convergence of alternatives around world-making after growth. *Development*, 66(1), 15-22.