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UBUNTU AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AN AFRICAN ECO-SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

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I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it. (Fanon 1967: 179)

Nowhere is the quest for an ecologically just existence more urgent than in Africa, a continent hovering on the brink of ecocide after centuries of subjugation of its people and looting of its riches. This chapter argues that Africa’s worldview and philosophy, known as ubuntu in southern Africa, embodies an ecological ethics that could inspire green socialist imaginaries in the battle against climate change. As a living ethics, ubuntu demands an activism of solidarity and decolonisation in the face of what Vishwas Satgar terms an ‘imperial ecocide’ (see Satgar in this volume).

Ecological socialism (eco-socialism hereafter) and ubuntu are both held as unfinished, evolving and aspirational projects (Cornell & Van Marle 2015; Kovel 2011). Both strive for more inclusive, egalitarian and ecocentric solutions to contemporary crises. It is argued that despite the failure of historic attempts to fuse ubuntu and socialism into endogenous post-capitalist projects,
compelling reasons remain for reopening a conversation about their complementarity. As this chapter aims to illustrate, an ubuntu ethics has already played midwife to the radical notion of post-extractivism, that is, leaving behind for future generations the fossil fuels and minerals that drive destructive capitalist accumulation and its crises, notably climate change.

Ubuntu is understood as an Africa-wide ethical paradigm that, notwithstanding regional versions, is practised widely across sub-Saharan Africa (Chuwa 2014). As an ethics of interrelationships, situated in a communitarian social fabric of caring and sharing, ubuntu may equal, and even exceed, socialist notions of a ‘radical egalitarianism’ (Cornell 2009; Cornell & Van Marle 2015). An emerging consensus holds that ubuntu cannot be compatible with capitalist relations, the commodification of nature or inequality. The first endogenous attempts at systemising a political economy of African philosophy – the work of scholar-leaders Amilcar Cabral, Leopoldt Senghor, Frantz Fanon and Julius Nyerere, among others – still hold potential (Chuwa 2014; Metz 2014a) for a more communitarian ecological paradigm. This archive of endogenous ideas allows us to reread previous attempts at decolonisation and social justice from the perspective of a transition to a more just ecological future.

Historically, ubuntu has been misappropriated and co-opted for senseless, and even violent, nation-building projects and shallow corporate social responsibility ventures. Ubuntu also tends to be dismissed as hierarchical and outdated. Evidence to the contrary suggests, however, that it is thriving – as practice and philosophy – from rural commonages to urban townships (see Cornell 2002). Contemporary reviews point to its potential as a counterhegemonic alternative: a ‘revolutionary ubuntu’ that informs life and death struggles against capitalist enclosure and fossil fuel imperialism. This chapter cannot claim to provide a full exposition of ubuntu as a worldview that values interrelationships between humans and nature. The aim is rather to tease out those tenets of ubuntu that could catalyse a project of radical transformation to a more ecologically just future.

It is important to highlight the significant complementarity between Latin America’s *buen vivir* indigenous ethics and ubuntu. Both reject modernity’s nature–society duality and regard restorative justice as the principle mechanism to achieve harmony with the cosmos (Shutte 2009a). Harmonious relationships with nature are central to the community’s and the individual’s emergence and reproduction – premised on communitarian, decentralised
forms of self-governance (see Benedetta & Margherita 2013; Walsh 2011). Both could be seen as guides to challenge the limits of liberal democracy, liberal rights and unlimited growth for post-colonial and post-capitalist futures (see Collard, Dempsey & Sundberg 2015; Praeg & Magadla 2014).

This chapter also assesses the compatibility of ubuntu values with eco-socialist ideals. Attempts to fuse ubuntu with socialism during the post-colonial years did not realise the radical egalitarianism of either philosophy and, therefore, require critical review. An ubuntu perspective demands a thorough decolonisation of nature as exploitable resource (Bassey 2013). It requires ecologically just modes of transition to go beyond ‘shallow, technocratic progressivism’ (Kovel 2011) that obscures the consequences of technology-led ‘just transitions’ for workers in advanced countries and that often happens at the expense of the global South (Goodman & Salleh 2013; Salleh 2014). Such techno-paradigms or defensive transitions, as Jacklyn Cock (2014) argues, would at best result in a shallow transformation.

**DRAWING LESSONS FROM AFRICA’S FIRST-WAVESOCIALISM AND MARXISM**

Post-colonial statehood projects founded on socialism and ubuntu ethics did not outlive their founders. The mostly disastrous repertoire of nearly all Marxist–Leninist and socialist nation-building experiments bequeathed us with few inspiring and authentically African lessons. John Saul (2013) and Daryl Glaser (2013) suggest that exceptions include the socialist and ubuntu principles of Nyerere’s *ujamaa* (‘family socialism’) in Tanzania and Senghor’s Negritude in Senegal. This section argues that these early socialist visions, as historic decolonial alternatives to western instrumental rationality, may yet inspire endogenous eco-socialist imaginaries (Chuwa 2014; Glaser 2013; Kanu 2014).

While attempts to foster an African endogenous socialism failed, it needs to be stressed that both African governance generally and Marxism globally foundered historically (Glaser 2013). All African liberation movements, regardless of ideology, adopted modernisation and industrial development models once in power, attempting to make up for purported historical backwardness. Instead of actual development, dependency and marginalisation ensued. These structural inequalities deepened Africa’s mal-integration into
the global economy, thus leaving fledgling states with ‘sub-optimal choices’ (Amin 2014: 32).

African socialist parties differed historically from orthodox (scientific socialist) Marxism–Leninism equivalents in Angola, Ethiopia and Benin, among others. These orthodox projects were characterised by violent state-centred imposition of rapid industrialisation and large-scale mechanised farming. Repression of language and cultural rights (Glaser 2013) was widespread, notably also of indigenous practices and philosophies such as ubuntu. By contrast, the earlier socialist post-colonial leaders – including Kwame Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor and Guinea’s Sékou Touré – are credited with envisioning a more authentic anti-imperialism, based on critiques of Eurocentric modernity, communitarian democratic norms and solidarity economies (Glaser 2013; McCulloch 1981). African ideals of a deeper participatory democracy, as expressed in ubuntu (Shutte 2009a), were discarded once in power, thus denying citizens the right to challenge ideological orientations (Glaser 2013). Statist and totalitarian tendencies emerged (Glaser 2013) and the peasantry was pushed out of feudalism towards modernity. This patently violated the respect for diversity that lies at the root of ubuntu practice (Chuwa 2014). Neglect of rural populations and even violent imposition of development blueprints marked nearly all African post-colonial projects, including some promising endogenous experiments, such as Nyerere’s *ujamaa* programme.

*Ujamaa* was a conscious, albeit overambitious, attempt at fusing ubuntu with socialism (Chuwa 2014; Ibhawoh & Dibua 2003; Saul 2013). The plan anticipated an African socialism at national scale based on collective ownership and decision making. A centrepiece was the *ujamaa vijijini* (‘villagisation’) scheme for rural transformation based on autonomous communal peasant modes of production reorganised around village cooperatives. In an idea not so different to today’s ambitions for sustainable production through metabolic circles, the villages were to be part of a virtuous circle of ‘ever increasing exchanges between city and country, between industry and agriculture’ (Saul 2013: 205). Saul argues this scheme was meant to lay the tracks for a Tanzanian ‘alliance of workers, peasants and others – on a democratic road to revolutionary socialism’ (2013: 204–206).

*Ujamaa’s* environmental philosophy was never fully defined, but Nyerere pronounced the proposal anti-capitalist given that Africans were already concerned about one another’s welfare through care and reciprocity (Chuwa 2014). These ethics are cornerstones of ubuntu, but were undermined by coerced
enforcement of rural ‘villagisation’, which ultimately led to ujamaa being discredited (Saul 2013). The degeneration of ubuntu ethics into a rigid non-interactive ‘political ideology’ is regarded a core reason for ujamaa’s failure (Chuwa 2014). A critical lesson for the renewal of Marxism through ecological values is that imposed development ‘negated the time tested ecological practice of the peasant farmers’ (Ibhawoh & Dibua 2003: 70).

Contemporary scholars regard ujamaa and Senghor’s Negritude as genuine attempts at delinking from capitalist circuits, aimed at national self-reliance and the achievement of social equity and distributive justice (Chuwa 2014; Ibhawoh & Dibua 2003; Legum 1999). Nyerere’s political philosophy is being reread as a radical revision of liberal justice that questions the concept of equal rights superimposed upon capitalism’s socio-economic structural inequalities. Equality, for Nyerere, was a demand for dignity and, therefore, equality should supersede liberal individual rights (Issa Shivji, in Praeg & Magadla 2014).

It is the originality of some intellectual contributions, notably Fanon’s and Senghor’s humanism, that has outlasted the national experiments and continues to inspire contemporary left politics (Glaser 2013; Wallerstein 2009). This is especially pertinent to the ecological crisis, given Fanon’s emphasis on the relational character of collectives in opposition to western individualism and its dualities, such as the separation between society and nature. The historic repression of rural populations also runs counter to the instincts of both Fanon and Cabral that the peasantry’s agency was a significant factor in true liberation as a negation of colonialism’s modes of exclusion (McCulloch 1981; Naicker 2011). Today, peasant agency remains crucial to quests for ecological justice among Africa’s social movements, for example food sovereignty and anti-extractive networks (see Bassey, and Bennie and Satgoor in this volume).

Significantly, what all post-colonial thinkers had in common was a rejection of private property and self-enrichment. Nyerere and Senghor, however, both had doubts about the forced distribution of welfare that socialism demanded, given their conviction that the community was already a distributive agent through caring and sharing (Chuwa 2014). African philosophy is critically dismissive of private property relations – as a violation of all other relations – and this is where a conversation with eco-socialism could start (Caromba 2014; Chuwa 2014; Kanu 2014). A growing consensus holds that ubuntu’s political economy is not compatible with capitalist relations (Caromba 2014), private property (Van Norren 2014) and, especially, pervasive inequality (Cornell & Van Marle 2015). One argument is that African humanism ‘demands a
sustained attack on mass poverty by means of a Venezuelan- or Bolivian-style welfare state’ (Biney 2014, cited in Caromba 2014: 210).

This is where the argument for a red–green alliance based on indigenous values becomes tenuous. Latin America’s recent attempts to merge indigenous worldviews with socialism – known as the ‘pink tide’ revolutions – may have made progress on mass poverty, but failed to implement the ecological transformation agreed to with indigenous populations. In Bolivia and Ecuador, the (green) indigenous (buen vivir) principles that promised to decolonise society–nature relations were violated as progressive labour movements fell into elite traps (see Acosta and Abarca, and Sólon in this volume). Constitutional guarantees of alternatives to development and harmony with nature were abandoned as state–corporate elites succumbed to a dependency on environmentally destructive extractive exports during the commodity boom of the 2000s to expediently facilitate social distribution agendas (Svampa 2013).

Similar contradictions undermined Africa’s post-colonial socialist states. Many maintained close relationships with western corporations (Praeg 2014, in Metz 2014a) and development took precedence over sustainability concerns. Africa’s mineral wealth and increasing post-colonial dependency on raw material exports remains a significant challenge to environmental and social justice. The continent’s resources are still plundered at an unprecedented scale in a new scramble for Africa, with the complicity of its own governing elites (Bassey 2012; Bond 2015). Ubuntu scholars argue that given the corporate capture of nation-states, ‘only a continent-wide socialism is viable’ (Sjivji 2014, cited in Metz 2014a: 450). Critics of Latin America’s failed ‘pink tide’ revolutions, too, contend that neoliberal state facilitation of capital means that ecological justice (for example, post-extractive transitions) might have more potential beyond the state, at local, regional and interregional levels (Gudynas 2013; Sólon 2016).

Given that crucial mistakes were made in the post-colonial era, Glaser (2013) argues that Marxism today is only one among many democracy-respecting discourses in Africa’s struggles to overcome capitalism’s hidden abode of (re)production in the global South. In such a quest, however, there is room for conversation with, among others, ecologists, about reframing social justice and democracy. We may therefore dismiss the possibility of an African ubuntu eco-socialism. Alternatively, as Saul (2013) maintains, more could be lost in deciding not to dare – the fait accompli of neocolonialism.

For a renewal of Marxism in Africa, therefore, it is important to tease out convergences through which we could bring ubuntu and eco-socialism into
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In the following section, this potential is examined first through the window of current struggles in their everyday validation of Africa’s ethics, and then through a comparison between contemporary eco-socialist principles and earlier ubuntu-inspired socialist templates.

**GRASSROOTS STRUGGLES RECLAIMING AN AFRICAN ECO-ETHICS AND SOCIALISM**

The revival of ubuntu – as an activist eco-ethics – could be located at the confluence of struggles against neoliberalism and climate change in the early 1990s. Neocolonial state–corporate alliances have continued to undermine autonomous community agency and the environmental commons in resource-rich regions of the south. Environmental destruction from oil extraction had already been destabilising Niger Delta communities for decades when the Nigerian state executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight fellow environmental activists for peaceful resistance against petro-imperialism (Bassey 2012; Klein 2014). Before his execution, Saro-Wiwa ([1995] 1996) predicted all of us would be on trial for jeopardising future generations.

His last message catalysed a global quest to leave fossil fuels in the soil. A 1995 meeting of minds between prominent climate activist Nnimmo Bassey’s Nigeria-based Environmental Rights Action movement and Ecuador’s Amazon basin eco-watch group *Acción Ecológica* resulted in the formation of the global Oilwatch network. Their rallying cry became to ‘leave it in the ground’ (Bassey 2012; Klein 2014). These struggles raised the profile of ecological justice globally, along with the indigenous cosmovisions of those so often at the coalface of extractivism, such as Latin America’s indigenous communities and their worldview, *buen vivir* (see Acosta and Abarca, and Sólon in this volume). As an ethical guide for ecological justice, the prominence of *buen vivir* spurred renewed interest in ubuntu as a companion counterhegemonic eco-alternative.

In the years that followed, ubuntu re-emerged on several fronts, in ways that accentuated its restorative justice and intergenerational ethics in relation to the environment. Just weeks after Saro-Wiwa’s death, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission popularised the idea of ubuntu as forgiveness for apartheid’s sins. In the context of the African National Congress government’s betrayal of social justice, the metaphor of forgiveness was nothing but controversial. It nevertheless provoked expansive reflection about ubuntu ethics and
its critique of capitalism – a compelling point of departure for a dialogue with eco-socialism.

In her book *This Changes Everything*, climate activist Naomi Klein (2014: 12) argues that although we have the means to make a just transition to a post-carbon and post-capitalist society, we lack the ‘mindset’. She contends that we need a new communal ethos to take the leap, critically one outside the dualist mindset and crisis-prone logic of western capitalism. Overcoming the deadly separation between humans and nature on which capitalism relies would require a battle of worldviews: ‘… a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect’ (Klein 2014: 404).

Africa’s ubuntu worldview already embodies such a communal mindset, as evidenced in struggles at the cusp of fossil fuel destruction, from the Niger Delta to the mines of South Africa’s minerals–energy complex at Marikana; the coalfields of KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Limpopo; and new oilfields and coal mines in Kenya, nearly all threatening age-old ecological and cultural sites and sustainable peasant agriculture. South Africa’s continued coal addiction has seen the livelihoods, as well as ubuntu enactments, centred on ‘sacred sites’ sacrificed at the altar of mega-coal – from vhaVenda women’s battles against the aggressive encroachment of coal mines on ‘sacred’ water sites (Sibaud 2012), to similar struggles by the largely women-organised Fuleni communities against the impacts of coal intrusion on their livelihoods and on the Umfolozi River basin which feeds into the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site.

Niger Delta communities continue to wage some of the most sustained counterstruggles on the continent, demonstrating Africa’s radical restorative activism. These struggles are based on local understandings that crude oil impoverishes the community, but also the Earth. Klein (2014: 265–266) describes this as ‘another kind of climate change’: an attempt ‘by a group of people whose lands had been poisoned and whose future was imperiled to change their political climate, their security climate, their economic climate, and even their spiritual climate’.

Petrochemical company Shell was successfully evicted from Delta territories through peaceful resistance by the 1990s (Klein 2014), but Nigeria’s heavy reliance on oil export revenue means petro-elites are never fully deterred. Niger Delta women often take the lead in counterstruggles to protect the commons, because as small-scale farmers and fishers, they are disproportionately
impacted by the poisoning of water, air and land from reckless extraction practices. In 2002, they occupied oil facilities, stripping naked to embarrass men for making deals that undermined their livelihoods (Turner & Brownhill 2004).

A ‘pan-Delta defence’ against Nigerian and US military repression was orchestrated to close down about forty per cent of Nigerian crude oil facilities. Significantly, the women’s stand inspired activism far beyond the Niger Delta: global movements took up their case to oppose the impending US invasion of Iraq to protect its oil supplies, culminating in a fifty-million-strong global protest in 2003. Women’s peasant agency represents what has been described as a far-reaching challenge to fossil fuel power, anywhere, by evicting them at source (Turner & Brownhill 2004).

The radical agency at work cannot be divorced from regional Niger Delta ubuntu eco-ethics, such as the Ibibio worldview eti uwem, which expresses ‘restorative justice’ succinctly as meaning that no monetary price can be placed on life. Hence, they demand restoration, rather than compensation, for fossil fuel harms. Eti uwem, like ubuntu, means living in harmony with nature and all peoples by communally caring for the environment. As an ethic, it rejects the speculation, exploitation, expropriation and environmental destruction wrought by fossil extraction. Struggles to bring into being such ethics are citizen-driven participatory processes aimed at moving ‘from ecologically disruptive living to one where energy and other production and consumption modes are respectful of nature’ (Bassey 2013).

Post-extractivism13 was further mobilised by the radical Durban Declaration (2004), endorsed by over 300 climate justice lobbies, mostly from the global South. The Declaration insists that carbon trading, notably the 1997 Kyoto Protocol schemes, deepens the financialisation of nature while ‘causing more and more military conflicts’ globally. The aim to ‘leave it in the ground’ has since become an important point of convergence between eco-socialism and ubuntu ethics because many eco-socialists endorse capping fossil fuel consumption. Respected eco-socialist Joel Kovel (2007) is among those who support ‘leave it in the ground’ because it imposes limits on capitalist expansion and prevents the continuous disruption of the global South.

Saro-Wiwa’s legacy continues to spread through new alliances and networks of activism, among others through Bassey’s ‘Yes to life, no to mining’ campaign14 to stop a rapid increase in mining across the continent. The campaign aims to protect the conditions upon which life depends, including healthy ecosystems, which in turn make possible food sovereignty for current and future
generations. The birth of the global movement to ‘leave it in the ground’ could thus be attributed in part to Africa and its ubuntu ethics. Struggles against extractivism show that ubuntu both calls forth and provides a template for activism and decolonisation of the capitalist reproduction of nature. As an ethical, political and ideological concept, ubuntu always arises in struggle, most pertinently, in historical terms, as an anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-imperial injunction against western modernity, which founded itself on the ‘spectral other’ of blackness (Cornell & Van Marle 2015; Garuba 2013; Praeg & Magadla 2014).

These struggles are emblematic of ubuntu’s restorative ethics as they imply non-extraction, in contrast to mainstream western notions of compensation for heinous environmental crimes (Metz 2014b) or the perverse practice of counting production of non-renewable resource exports as GDP growth when, instead, it inflicts an ecological debt on future generations. As Bassey (2012: 151–152) argues, the mass poisoning of extractivism is the greatest violence communities can endure: ‘Revenue derived from crude oil exploitation, for example, can hardly finance restoration efforts that may be needed following years of impacts on the environment.’ This finds equivalence with Latin America’s *buen vivir*, which rejects monetary reparations for environmental impairment in favour of restoration of ecosystems (see Acosta and Abarca, and Sólon in this volume).

The question remains how ubuntu-inspired struggles may enable us to conceive of a broader political project in conversation with eco-socialism. And do African socialist templates offer us authentic threads to tie eco-socialism with ideological visions based on ubuntu ethics? To find answers, the following section compares the ecological principles spelled out through Senghor’s Negritude with those of contemporary eco-socialist slates.

**TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL REFRAMING OF UBUNTU AND ECO-SOCIALISM**

Senegal’s philosophy of Negritude was perhaps most explicit among its post-colonial counterparts about the interdependence between the ecosphere and the social. Negritude asserts that Africans view the world ‘beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis’ (Chuwa 2014: 58). This emphasises responsibility to counter the immorality
of violence to nature that is held as tantamount to violent acts against humanity. As a cultural perspective, it invokes an ethical consideration for healing dysfunctional biospheres (Chuwa 2014) that motivates struggles against extractivism.

It should be noted that not all scholars regard Senghor’s legacy as progressive, despite the Marxist roots of Negritude among Africa’s diaspora intellectuals. Some see Senghor as having drifted towards French culture and conservatism and criticise his dismissal of the need for opposition parties in African democracies (Legum 1999). Cabral regarded Negritude as an essentialisation of a bygone African culture that could obstruct the road to modern universalism.15 Nevertheless, Negritude (as a fusion of Marxism and ubuntu) allows us to juxtapose contemporary notions of eco-socialism with an endogenous African political economy, promoted as four negritudes during Senghor’s term as Senegal’s president (between 1960 and 1980):

- Political negritude based on decentralisation of power and federalism (power sharing) – based on traditional African polities;
- Economic negritude spelled out African society’s prohibition against private property and wealth. Labour is defined as ‘collective and free’;
- Social negritude centred on the family (community) as the sum of all persons living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor. It is an inclusive concept, but not fully compatible with Marxism’s secularism;
- Cultural negritude extends relationships to the more-than-human, because ‘the reinforcement of man is at once the reinforcement of other created things’ (Senghor 1975, cited in Kanu 2014: 525).

In order to find touchstones between this African socialist vision and eco-socialism, I turn to Kovel, whose influential The Enemy of Nature (2007) provides two definitions of eco-socialism. Both definitions emphasise freely associated labour reunited with the means of production. This would be ‘ecocentric’ production because markets would be curtailed and the limits to growth respected. While rejecting a ‘shallow, technocratic progressivism’, Kovel’s emphasis on production units as pivots for a just transition to eco-socialism does not fully break with teleological industrial modernisation and its dependence on the commons of the global South. Nor does it overcome the dualist human–nature tendencies of Eurocentric thought, something inherently rejected by indigenous cosmovisions such as ubuntu and buen vivir.
Setting out four criteria for eco-socialism as prefigurative struggles necessary for a just transition, a 2011 template by Kovel nevertheless provides a baseline for comparison with Senghor’s vision. These struggles would inherently resist centralisation and hierarchy; gender distinctions that permeate patriarchal society; the logic of endless growth; and would ‘spontaneously adopt an ethic of ecocentrism, that is, of caring for nature’ (Kovel 2011, emphasis added).

Correspondences between Kovel’s template for eco-socialism and Senghor’s formulation of an African proto-eco-socialism are unmistakable in their emphases on decentralised autonomy in the reproduction of just social relations and caring for the environment. Neither template is compatible with imposed doctrinal Marxism. Although expressed differently, both stress the need to move beyond private property relations, which trumps other forms of social relations in its pursuit of capitalist expansion. Absent from Senghor, however, is the more explicit objective of gender equality, although the latter is implicit in Negritude critiques of the western creation of black and gendered ‘others’ as inferior and exploitable. In ubuntu, gender is often understood as a pronounced category of difference among humans, but women are not a lesser ‘other self’ (Shutte 2009a), although it cannot be denied that unjust gender power relations continue to pervade African society.

Kovel (2007) moots the concept of sufficiency as a substitute for jaded sustainability talk, by linking basic needs to a social justice approach – much like the ‘pink tide’ revolutions in Latin America. While eco-sufficiency is central to eco-feminist and indigenous proposals for a just transition, it is important to understand sufficiency in a broader ecological justice framework (see Salleh 2009; Solón in this volume). Like many eco-socialist and eco-Marxist templates, Kovel’s lacks an explicit acknowledgement of the counterhegemonic potential of alternative worldviews and the agency of more-than-human nature. Considering ecocentric alternatives, it is important to recognise alternative rationalities about what it is we value and want to reproduce for future generations.

Most eco-socialists, however, endorse a concept commensurate with ubuntu and other peasant and indigenous practices that could help us conceive of a deeper conversation: ‘commoning’ – acts of solidarity, mutual aid and struggles to defend the commons. Kovel (2011) argues that such non-capitalist modes of sharing could help construct eco-socialism through his four struggles (above) as they are ‘internally related and each implies the other’. All are regarded as functions of the free association of labour grounded in forms of commoning.
The commons also bring together the interests of productive and reproductive workers in a just transition. Ashley Dawson (2010: 17) stresses the importance of reframing ‘pre- and post-industrial social formations’ in contesting ensuing enclosure of the commons – in line with Antonio Gramsci’s ‘vision of uniting workers and peasants across geographical and cultural divides’. Social movements, such as anti-fossil fuel networks and global food sovereignty campaigns, notably La Via Campesina, are emblematic of commoning across race, class and gender divides. They show its potential for bridging the human–nature divide through ecocentric struggles to care for nature, the commons and future generations (see Bassey, and Bennie and Satgoor in this volume).

Ubuntu ethics are evident in these ready-existing commoning practices found among the world’s ‘meta-industrial’ reproductive workers. These are the women, men, peasants and indigenous people whose agency embodies precaution, eco-sufficiency and autonomy in pursuing ecological justice through everyday regenerative labour at the cusp of nature (Goodman & Salleh 2013; Salleh 2009). The potential of indigenous ethics such as ubuntu and *buen vivir* as prefigurative counterhegemonic alternatives (McAfee 2016) contrasts starkly with just transitions conceived via techno-decoupling modalities based on sustaining industrial production at the expense of ecological well-being.

Senghor’s and Kovel’s visions provide us with a theoretical platform from which to explore a dialogue between contemporary ubuntu and eco-socialism. The last section seeks a deeper evaluation of ubuntu’s evolving principles to highlight its inherent eco-ethics as a *site of critique*. The purpose is to locate contemporary interpretations of ubuntu ethics that allow for convergence with eco-socialism in shaping the emancipatory potential of an endogenous African alternative.

**UBUNTU’S CHALLENGE TO ECO-SOCIALISM**

Current debates about ubuntu largely affirm the archive of post-colonial articulations. While ubuntu has been defined as anything from indigenous knowledge to tribal belief and ethics or post-colonial ideology, it will remain a controversial concept (Graness 2015b). Yet, as a form of critique of such liberal prejudices, ubuntu is also ‘staging a dissensus’: ‘By way of everyday practices and ordinary lives, traditional liberal assumptions of the self, but also of law, justice and power are thwarted’ (Cornell & Van Marle 2015: 4). The point is
that recognition of its radical praxis could help us open a space for reflection, critique and processes of restoration at large.

Recent scholarship explores ubuntu ethics from several ecological angles that broadly affirm Senghor’s and Nyerere’s political economy as well as the ethos behind grassroots activists’ resource resistance. Central to both is the community as the pivot of interrelationships, eco-sufficiency and care, requiring an ethics of doing no harm. Being and becoming in ubuntu entails building improved communities inclusive of non-human nature.

Breaking out of the idea that ubuntu is an archaic and patriarchal relic, contemporary debates recognise ubuntu’s activist ethos, which inherently challenges oppression and harmful development (Chuwa 2014; Cornell 2009). Ubuntu is affirmed as an ‘ethical demand to bring about a shared world’ that actively ‘promotes the actual experience of building, enhancing and, at times, repairing the moral fabric of an aspirational community’ (Cornell 2009: 48). Ubuntu compels solidarity in the face of injustice and requires ‘reparation of broken relationships’ (Metz 2014b: 153). Its mode of reproduction is a continuous process – often denoting struggle – centred on the moral agency residing in interrelationships between human community members, but critically also with and through non-human life (Chuwa 2014; Le Grange 2012; Shutte 2009a). As eco-ethics it therefore poses a counterhegemonic challenge to the anti-politics of capitalist development (McAfee 2016).

Ubuntu is regarded as a deeply bio- or ecocentric ethic. African ‘concern’ about the environment goes beyond Eurocentric ‘fascination’ with nature. It demands capacity to ‘empathize with nature’ (Mazrui 1977, cited in Murove 2009: 325) and holds potential for a global alternative to western environmentalism, which has not been able to halt gross environmental abuse (Bujo 2009; Naicker 2011). Ubuntu scholar Munyaradzi Murove (2009: 315) asserts that ‘Africa yet possesses in its own traditional culture the roots of an ethical paradigm to solve the current environmental crisis. This is an ethic of an interdependence of individuals within the larger society to which they belong and to the environment on which they all depend’.

Restorative justice is premised on strong self-governance of both communities and resources, intended to maintain harmonious relationships across generations with humans and the environment. The original practice is based on clan meetings such as indaba, which are (in theory) radically inclusive and open consensus-seeking processes (Naicker 2011; Shutte 2009a). Critically, this implies a preference for regional and local governance (Shutte 2009b), in line
with Senghor’s and Kovel’s emphasis on decentralised autonomy. Thus ‘care’ – and its relation to restoration – derives from both community and solidarity in ‘sharing a way of life’. Although alternatives such as ‘sharing’ are often shunned by eco-socialists as not sufficiently counterhegemonic (see Kovel 2011), ubuntu’s care ethic make an important contribution to the debate as it emphasises solidarity and dialogue in determining *that which ought to be restored* (Metz 2013). Its ethic of care and restoration speaks to the autonomy of human–nature relationships in the environmental commons (Metz 2013). This points towards convergence for a just transition between eco-socialists, eco-feminists, indigenous peoples, social movements, non-capitalist social experiments and other peripheral groups, especially in the global South.

Another element in ubuntu’s restorative justice is the intergenerational building of just communities inclusive of non-human life and ecosystems. Intergenerational ethics, like restorative justice, is not uncommon among indigenous worldviews, with a pronounced seventh-generation principle in Indochina and across the Americas (Gibson 2012; Goodwin [1994] 2001). Its significance for a just transition is nevertheless that in most indigenous communities ‘one almost always finds institutions with rules that serve to limit short-term self-interest and promote long-term group interest’ (Berkes 2008, cited in Sullivan 2014: 227). In this context it is important to recall Karl Marx’s view that we are responsible for the Earth, which cannot be just ‘property’ as we have to hand it down in ‘an improved condition’: ‘From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite absurd … Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe’ (Marx, cited in Kovel 2007: 268).

Africa’s worldview speaks to Marx’s stance that humanity has a duty to hand down the Earth ‘to succeeding generations in an improved condition’. Its activism and ethics thus already embodies *an ethic of ecocentrism … of caring for nature* (Kovel 2011, emphasis added). An ubuntu dialogue with eco-socialism could not be conceived of without this inherent intergenerational activism and its underlying care and restorative ethics – critically enabled by a critique of the Eurocentric othering of nature, women and Africans.

A deeper notion of an African eco-socialism would also recognise ubuntu as an African well-being alternative with political and legal importance and communitarian moral responsibility to south–south solidarity (Van Norren 2014). Far from a shallow proposition, it proposes a ‘fundamental reshaping
of our thinking … where acting out of “self-interest” is balanced by the notion of “not existing without the other”” (2014: 261). Ubuntu as ‘site of critique’ of Euro-modernity is therefore a radical challenge that cannot be taken lightly: ‘Ubuntu will never accept final restoration because it “resides in a perpetual remarking of default”’. This is because ubuntu ‘continually marks and re-marks a loss of humanity, and of human dignity’ – processes of restoration that can never be finite (Cornell & Van Marle 2015: 4, citing Sanders 2007, emphasis added).

Ubuntu’s restorative justice ethics could therefore also be seen as a form of insurgency because its political economy exposes power imbalances and the evasion of responsibility when decisions are made about that which ought to be restored. It challenges those state–corporate alliances that subvert the fulfilment of needs (Sullivan & Tifft 2006). As such, ubuntu is also emerging as a ‘broader project of subaltern legality’ because it challenges the limits of legality of western law and policy through, among others, mass mobilisation (Cornell 2014, cited in Graness 2015a: 146–147), as exemplified by the Niger Delta activists. Racism, too, is contested at all levels – in law, philosophy and politics. It is argued that ubuntu thereby articulates a radical conception of democracy that ought to be taken seriously in any project that aims to renew what Drucilla Cornell calls ‘the philosophical and political project of human solidarity … This it can only do if we take seriously the emancipatory potential for radical transformation embodied by “revolutionary Ubuntu”’ (Cornell 2014, cited in Praeg & Magadla 2014: 11).

The South African shack-dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo coined the term ‘revolutionary ubuntu’ to explain that ubuntu cannot be compatible with capitalism. A range of ubuntu scholars agree, although not all see its ethics well matched to socialism either (Metz 2014a). Ubuntu’s denunciation of private property rights and wealth, however, provides a bridge to eco-socialism (Chuwa 2014; Ramose 2014, in Caromba 2014) as it inherently rejects what David Harvey (2008: 23) slates as the primacy of ‘property rights over process, things and social relations’ in capitalism, which trumps all other rights. Ubuntu justice infers that there are always rights that are morally more important than property in relationships between people and the Earth, given that the Earth is a ‘commonwealth to all humanity’ (Odera Oruka, cited in Graness 2015b: 129–130). Such a radical quest for social justice steeped in a relational eco-ethic represents a constructive avenue for dialogue and solidarity with eco-socialism.
Potential for a dialogue, however, requires acknowledgement of the radical inequalities wrought on Africans and the absence of private property ownership and its material relations in debates on justice (including ecological justice). The reality of humans as relational beings and the basic needs required for them to act as moral beings are not always appreciated (Graness 2015b). Equally important for a discussion about the compatibility of ubuntu and eco-socialism is to take heed that ubuntu cannot be separated from its decolonial aspirations and is therefore irrevocably shackled to its resistance to modernity, a context into which socialism was also born (Praeg 2013). As site of critique and dissensus, ubuntu helps us to conceive of a discourse with socialism’s own critique against capitalist relations. But it demands an unsettling of categories of race, gender, class and all ‘others’ – notably ‘nature’ itself – as created by Euro-modernity. In contrast to Eurocentric rational modes of continuous ‘dis-enchantment’ with the world, the practice of ubuntu implies a ‘continual re-enchantment’ which rejects ‘boundaries, binaries and demarcations and the linearity of modernity’ (Garuba 2013: 50).

Decolonisation will remain central to counterstruggles and radical alternatives in the face of imperial ecocide. Ubuntu could serve as a decolonising spirit (Carroll 2013), catapulting ubuntu discourses to an international level to show how the ‘burning issues of the global South are the burning issues of nation states everywhere in the world’ (Graness 2015a: 147). Ubuntu as critique therefore represents a challenge to the north to rethink its assumptions about democracy and justice. Yet, as Fanon warned fifty years ago, decolonisation is a ‘profoundly unsettling process’ because it ‘sets out to change the order of the world’ (1963: 36, cited in Collard, Dempsey & Sundberg 2013: 329).

NOTES
1 Ubuntu (isiZulu, isiXhosa) and botho (Sesotho and Setswana) mean ‘humanness’, while Zimbabwe’s ukama (Shona) stresses ‘relatedness’ (Murove 2009).
2 Regional counterparts include bomoto (Bobangi), gimuntu (Kikongo), umundu (Kikuyu), Vumunhi (Xitsonga), Uhuthu (Tshivenda), Umuntu (Uganda), Umuntu (Malawi) (Benedetta & Margherita 2013; Murove 2009).
3 The values and ideas underpinning ubuntu are central to all African cultures (Shutte 2009a). As ubuntu, it is most prominently practised in southern Africa, also known as ukama in the Zimbabwe region (Naicker 2011), and in Nigeria as eti uwem (Bassey 2013).
4 *Buen vivir* or *vivir bien* is the Spanish approximation of regional ethics denoting ‘living well’ (see Acosta and Abarca, and Sólon in this volume).

5 See Volume 1 of this series.

6 *Ujamaa* was founded on Tanzania’s post-independent Arusha Declaration, which extrapolated from ‘the traditional way of life’ a *set of rights*, including human equality; human right to life, dignity and respect; equal rights as citizens; right to just reward for human labour; equal right of access to national natural resources and major means of production (Chuwa 2014). Negritude emphasises African cultural values, humanism and solidarity (Chuwa 2014; Kanu 2014).


8 Some scholars give a more qualified view, suggesting the village scheme failed, but *ujamaa* nevertheless delivered the only successful agrarian revolution in Africa, with improved communal health, education and sanitation projects (Legum 1999).

9 See Christoph Marx (2002) for an incisive critique of ubuntu as cynical manipulation for nation building without equity.


13 Theoretically, ‘extractivism’ refers to more than fossil fuels, including a proliferation of mineral and gem quarrying, factory farms, biofuels, wood and water – mostly for export.

14 The Africa-wide ‘Yes to life, no to mining’ network contends that mining does not benefit communities but puts pressure on their commons and sacred spaces, where diversity is treasured. In line with ubuntu ethics, the campaign aims to build communities and to support them to say no to mining, to revive their customary laws and to restore ecosystems (AFSA 2015).

15 In Manji, ‘Amilcar Cabral’s revolutionary anti-colonialist ideas’.

16 Commoning is widely practised in Africa and Latin America as well as among the urban poor (see Bennie and Satgoor in this volume).

17 The lack of explicit environmental content found in South African expressions of ubuntu could be blamed on the magnitude of loss of land (Green 2013), regarded as the seat of ubuntu-being (Mbiti 1969). The land-centred interdependence of ubuntu is better understood from the broader ontological concept of *ukama* (as practised in Zimbabwe) – denoting ‘relatedness’ with the entire cosmos (Le Grange 2012; Murove 2009).
The Climate Crisis

Communities in Pakistan/India, for example, studied new maize seed for seven generations before using it among their crops (Goodwin [1994] 2001), thus yielding systems far more resilient than imposed developmental practices.

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