The General Crisis of the Twenty-First Century?

The history of great civilisations is often marred by a destabilising and sometimes destructive crisis; recall, for instance, the crisis of the third century, which contributed to bringing the Roman Empire to its knees or the general crises that took hold in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of which were highly associated with the transition to urban and industrial capitalist development. Each of these periods was characterised by a wide host of interconnected problems, ranging from war, disease and environmental pressures to economic and political destabilisation. As these crises developed, they had significant transformative impacts on the affected societies, markedly changing the very
foundation of these civilisations. For instance, Eric Hobsbawm observed that the crisis of the seventeenth century constituted the final break from the feudal system, which had been in place for centuries, to a new capitalist economy (Hobsbawm 1965). Likewise, mounting tensions created by nationalist and imperialist disputes since the middle of the nineteenth century led to two world wars and the dramatic reconfiguration of global economy and society after 1945. As the twenty-first century unfolds, an interested bystander may become increasingly concerned when faced with acute environmental pressures (climate change, biodiversity loss, etc.), financial crises (such as the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, still largely unresolved and re-emerged in 2020, following the coronavirus pandemic), worrying trends of widening local and global inequalities, rapidly diminishing trust in politicians and institutions (e.g. Brexit and the 2016 results of the US electoral system) and the list goes on. Will the situation be eventually stabilised or are we witnessing the development of the general crisis of the twenty-first century, which will impact and transform today’s global civilisation?

Mainstream responses to these problems and to the environmental contradictions of mainstream development are typically devoted to their amelioration in an atomistic isolation from other issues, normally informed by discourses and the rationalisation of socio-economic and ecological problems as circumstantial failures of the existing politico-economic order (e.g. the concept of sustainable development as an attempt to build consensus around technological and managerial adjustments). However, a rejection of these responses appears to have taken hold in a number of countries and is spreading, most conspicuously on the political level. This is evident, for instance, in the rise of (apparent) anti-establishment (e.g. Donald Trump’s victory in the US 2016 presidential election) and right-wing extremist political parties in Europe (e.g. Alternative für Deutschland, the third largest party in the Bundestag after the 2017 election in Germany), their popular support fuelled by uncertainty in the world economy and the people’s declining confidence in the power of current political parties to adequately tackle socio-economic and environmental problems. In addition, there is a growing awareness among academics and social movements that current mainstream approaches to resolve the ongoing economic and environmental crises
(typically along the lines of ecological modernisation and market-based environmental conservation) can only provide superficial and short-term solutions as they fail to address the wider historical, political and socio-economic roots of the problems (such as those related to patterns of production and consumption, property regimes, widespread alienation and multi-scale power disputes). As a result, there has been a call from critical circles for radical transformation of the prevailing capitalist development system and the overcoming of its perverse repercussions at the global, national, local and personal level, and a shift towards a more radical critique may even be welcomed in the current political climate (Arnold 1990; Escobar 2007; Pepper 1993; Sachs 2010; Schweickart 2009, 2010).

The fall of the Soviet Empire led many to proclaim that this demonstrated the undeniable superiority of capitalism and the unfeasibility of other alternatives. However, at the same time, the remaining uneasiness about pending socio-ecological and existential problems have recently begun to chip away at the Western world’s shattered confidence in this totalising narrative, triggering a resurgence of radical critiques and keeping the debate about the future wide open (Ingham 2008; Kaletsy 2011; Prisecaru 2012). While many maintain that the current crises are simply manageable instabilities and not terminal contradictions (Kaletsky 2011), there are a number of scholars and activists who argue that the capitalist system is primed for a radical shift, somehow analogous to the transition from feudalist to capitalist Europe in the sixteenth century (Bellamy Foster 2013; Chase-Dunn 2014; Moore 2014a, b). However, in ‘a world gone cosmopolitan by default’, it is difficult to locate or prefigure the ‘exit’ to capitalism (Harvey 2014: ix) in concrete political, economic and social practices.

Our departing point in this chapter is to claim that it is not only important but necessary to explore the meaning and routes to a post-capitalist development pathway, one which may emerge should the General Crisis of the twenty-first century truly become a reality. An anticipatory or visionary approach is also relevant to help to understand the shortcomings of present-day society. For these reasons, it has become pertinent to draw our attention to those radical scholars and social movements, which challenge capitalist relations of production and reproduction, and advocate a substantive and meaningful reconfiguration of the
world system and a different interface between environment and development. The consideration of an ecosocialist alternative is an important element of those debates. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to contribute to the discussion on transformative agency in ecosocialism, and thus, to ecosocialism’s philosophy of praxis (Daldal 2014). Should the crisis materialise, to whom should our global society look if it wishes to see the materialisation of an ecosocialist system?

The Basis of Ecosocialism and the Focus of This Study

Ecosocialism constitutes one such radical critique of capitalism. Founded on a synthesis of red and green theories, it asserts that the current economic and environmental crises constitute one unified, not separate, ‘epochal crisis’ (Bellamy Foster 2013), which has emerged as a result of the capitalist mechanisms of production and reproduction. Ecosocialist authors indict capitalism’s ‘grow or die’ regime of accelerating accumulation for ecological destruction, the creation of exploitative working conditions, poverty and a highly individualistic society, which is addicted to commodity consumption (Ioris 2018; Kovel 2008b; Löwy 2015). It has recently been gaining prominence within development discourses, and social movements embodying some of the principles of ecosocialism are beginning to emerge worldwide (e.g. La Vía Campesina) and, despite the ‘demise’ of the Left in the West, many Latin American countries have had experiences with Left or Centre-Left governments, some of which have incorporated ecosocialist goals into their national constitutions (e.g. Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador) with varying levels of success and political acceptability (Adams 2009; Betto and Löwy 2010; Burkett 2006; Huan 2010; Löwy 2015; Löwy 2014; Radcliffe 2012). However, while it can be considered a persuasive political discourse for transformation, ecosocialism still faces significant epistemological, analytical and operative challenges (Huan 2010), which reflect the wider questions about the meaning and the contribution of radical political thinking in the contemporary world.
One particular gap in the work of many ecosocialist writers is the limited attention given to social actors, exactly those agents with the transformative capacity to realise the ecosocialist vision. This lacuna in the ecosocialist literature was rightly observed by Aşıcı (2012) and Aşıcı and Bünül (2011) in their review of the available literature and confirmed by the authors’ own research. This oversight is disappointing given that an analysis of transformative actors constitutes an undeniably vital component of a successful radical social critique, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint (Arnold 1990; Castree 2009). This is highlighted, for instance, in the definition of transformability of socio-ecological systems (SES) provided by Walker et al. (2004) as the capacity of social actors to ‘create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable’ (ibid.: 7). Such thinking arguably mirrors the conditions created by capitalism at this current juncture and emphasises that understanding agency is crucial to understanding large-scale transformation (Westley et al. 2013). The ecosocialist writers White et al. (2017) also hinted at the need to explore the transformative capacities of different actors, believing that the ‘second stage’ of ecosocialism constitutes an attempt to move beyond a critique of the status quo and towards an analysis of the conditions that will enable such a transition, including the empowerment of diverse agents.

In light of this, our research seeks to specifically contribute to the neglected topic of transformative agents in ecosocialism, from both a theoretical and empirically based standpoint. This chapter shall examine the transformative potential of key actors that are somehow associated with the ecosocialist vision, based on their outlined practices, their ability and commitment to form part of the transition to a new world order, and their capacity (power) to successfully bring about such changes. This was investigated through (1) an analysis of ecosocialist literature, including two emblematic ecosocialist manifestos (the Belém Declaration and the Réseau Ecosocialist Manifesto) and Ecuador’s national development plan, selected as documents which mirror ecosocialist goals and are actively employed and followed by a group of people, and (2) a power analysis of the controversial Belo Monte Dam project in Brazil, to investigate the power of the identified transformative agents within a practical
and ‘real-world’ context. The latter was selected as a case study based on Kovel’s (2014) assertion that ‘agents of transformation [will] emerge interstitially’ in ‘zones of emergence that appear as contradictions mature’ (ibid.: 14), and the prevailing view that Southern communities will be those most immediately and effectively impacted by environmental issues, and thus see the creation of such zones (White et al. 2017).

Transformative Agents Within Ecosocialist Discourses

Within the limited ecosocialist literature on the crucial subject of the identity, practices and imaginaries of social actors, there appears to be two prevailing perspectives as to the agents of transformation who could move society into a post-capitalist, ecosocialist future reality. One view prioritises the controversies in more affluent nations and social contexts, particularly those in the Global North, while the other attributes the responsibility for the envisioned transformation to those people less estranged from nature, typically rural and indigenous groups, predominantly those in the Global South. In order to more closely examine the issue of actors within ecosocialism, the conceptualisation of transformative agency and its function within SES from Westley et al. (2013) is adopted. This approach is considered to be complementary both to the objective of this study and to the theories of ecosocialism, given that it focuses on the role of social innovation in transforming problem domains in complex systems with a view to system change (Olsson 2017).

Agency is thus examined on a broad system scale in what Westley et al. (2013) term the ‘problem domain’, constituted of actors, organisations and institutions concerned with or affected by a complex problem; within the problem domain, strategic action or agency is required to move the process of transformation of the SES forward. Due to the complexity of the problem domain, agency is associated with the action of a myriad of actors, classes and class segments that push the system through different stages of transformation, an effort termed ‘institutional entrepreneurship’. This conceptualisation of agency is reflected in the writing of
ecosocialist writers, such as Kovel (2013) who asserts that ‘there is no privileged agent of ecosocialist transforming’ (ibid.: 14), but the post-capitalist transformation will be realised through an abundance of individual paths, which will eventually converge, having taken place where the contradictions of capitalism manifest themselves as opportunities (Holloway 2010; Kovel 2008a, b). The theory of institutional entrepreneurs in SES allows for such a pluralistic view of transformative agents, who are facing complex problems in SES, and an understanding of their different and disaggregated activities according to their temporally and spatially specific opportunities.

Our examination employs the theory of transformative agency of institutional entrepreneurs, adopting the heuristic framework employed by Westley et al. (2013), in order to shed light on the identity of the political subjects of the ecosocialist transformation. The approach is based on a combination of Holling’s 1986 adaptive cycle and Dorado’s 2005 model of opportunity context, which presents the context of SES as dynamic, with different opportunities for transformative agents emerging at different intervals (Fig. 9.1). Here, opportunity context indicates whether the current situation will permit actors to identify, introduce and institutionalise new ideas and reforms. This heuristic model, combined with the theory of the institutional entrepreneur, describes how actors emerge from within certain institutions to challenge and transform the status quo, and charts the wide diversity of skills and strategies required by these agents for a successful introduction and subsequent institutionalisation of a new or modified system (in this case, ecosocialist reforms). The three different opportunity contexts (opaque, hazy and transparent) are characterised by different configurations of two essential elements: (1) the diversity of organisations forms and (2) the degree of institutionalisation. The entrepreneurs, their agency and their roles are different according to the stages of the cycle and the specificities of the opportunity context therein. Olsson (2017) asserts that this is important where large-scale transformation within complex systems is required, and thus change must occur at multiple levels, scale and sectors. Indeed, it is highly likely that any post-capitalist transformation will necessarily take a non-linear form, where the cyclical movement through opportunity contexts occurs at different spatial and temporal scales.
In brief, the ‘back loop’ of the heuristic model constitutes the turbulent change portion of the cycle in which there exist multiple organisations and institutionalisation is low, thus allowing for novel ideas to emerge and trigger transformation of the institutional system. The new systemic configuration thus becomes increasingly stabilised, and is institutionalised as the new system of the ‘front loop’; here, the degree of institutionalisation is high, and few organisations are dominant. Although Kovel believes that no specific blueprint of a transition to an ecosocialist world can be laid out in advance (Kovel 2008a; Kovel 2013), this heuristic framework adopted from the study by Westley et al. (2013) can be employed to better visualise and discuss the diversity of actors who are required to successfully bring about changes in SES and the various skills, alliances and strategies needed according to different opportunity contexts, the latter being spatially and temporally specific. We are interested

![Figure 9.1 Theory of transformative agency in socio-ecological systems. (Adapted from Westley et al. 2013)](image-url)
in the agency that enables movement from the ‘front loop’—the current problem domain—to the ‘back loop’ where multiple agents are mobilised, new ideas emerge and are eventually institutionalised into the new ‘front loop’, a reformed (ecosocialist) system. Given that the transition process to ecosocialism is theorised to take place gradually through the action of a vast array of actors, a discussion on the spectrum of transformative agents, their different capabilities and resources, is important in order to successfully take advantage of opportunities as they emerge, borne out of the multiple crises of capitalism. The agents and their actions outlined in the three ecosocialist documents listed in the previous section are examined using this heuristic framework, allowing for a discussion on whether the agents and their actions stipulated cover the full transition from the current capitalist ‘front loop’ to an ecosocialist future ‘front loop’.

Taking the ‘opaque’ context as a starting point, this context is characterised by a few dominant organisations, and institutions and beliefs are well established. In order to challenge the status quo (which is identified as the ultimate cause of the complex problems society is facing), the primary strategies employed at this stage are those that introduce disturbances into the well-established system. Indigenous people and social groups, particularly those in South American countries where their power is more intact, are attributed the highest attention in ecosocialist literature and in the two ecosocialist manifestos examined, with their role primarily concerning introducing disturbances into the system. This performs the dual function of challenging established institutions and raising human consciousness. The Belém Declaration, adopted by the Ecosocialist International Network in 2009, was the result of a global mobilisation and focuses almost solely on such activities and those agents who are assigned the task of creating disturbances, largely through social activism and protests. This is an undeniably important part of the transformation process, but the document appears to operate at a high level of political activism and gives much less consideration for other strategies and other agents that will be required past the point of creating disturbances; this, therefore, raises questions as to how the ambitious goals outlined in the Belém Declaration will be met in the complex political landscape and with the high level of political demobilisation in the world today. This is a trend that tends to pervade ecosocialist literature—a gap
between the agent and their actions and the theorised ecosocialist reforms that will take place.

Our call for greater attention to the complexity of social protagonism seems to be greatly justified by the need to connect local and sectoral problems with global and generalised tensions. Coordinated political disturbances, combined with internal system shocks, such as crisis internal or external to the system, may subsequently cause the opportunity context to move from an ‘opaque’ to ‘hazy’; a change that is required, in this case, to allow for the system of capitalism to be directly and progressively challenged. In a ‘hazy’ context, old organisations have lost their dominance, causing institutions and beliefs to become open to interpretation and change. Recent economic and political crises across the globe combined with the growing environmental crisis have sent shockwaves through the system, but has this amounted to the creation of an ‘epochal’ crisis, as some have argued (Bellamy Foster 2013; Moore 2014a)? Have these shocks caused people to question the system of capitalism to the extent that its very foundations are being challenged? It can be argued that, previously, the capitalist system did not generate contradictions powerful enough to motivate the revolution predicted by Marxist scholars, but that the incorporation of the earth’s ecological limits will create a demand for immediate and more radical action (Whiteside 1997). Kovel (2008a: 242), while echoing this sentiment, believes that ‘none of these conditions is close to being met at present’. Indeed, an awareness of the urgency of environmental problems has existed for a number of decades, but meaningful and sustained radical action has yet to be observed; it is because of this that social actors need to be more carefully understood.

The continuing and self-reinforcing hegemony of the modern global capitalist system continues to consistently inhibit the prospects of a transition from an ‘opaque’ to a ‘hazy’ context, as it subdues challenges and threats to the system, thus restricting any movement towards a post-capitalist future. Indeed, Mankoff (1970) argues that the conditions for triggering radical social change are likely to be constantly present under capitalism, but the existing economic order is maintained due to the non-elites’ acceptance of capitalism’s legitimacy. Other authors also point to this false consciousness that pervades today’s society, which prevents it from challenging capitalism’s ideological hegemony (Kovel 2013; Pepper
This evokes a more classical Gramscian view of ideological hegemony exercised not by states specifically, but through social groups and certain dominating classes operating through the state (Robinson 2005). Perhaps for this reason, Dordoy and Mellor (2000) and Johns et al. (2003) argue that capitalism can only be overcome once the crisis truly affects those affluent groups that benefit from the exploitation of people and the planet, implying that the transnational capitalist bourgeois is a pivotal change agent in the ecosocialist transition. It is thus possible that the crucial movement to a ‘hazy’ context, in which the foundations of capitalism can be challenged and new ideas allowed to emerge, requires action from the affluent, capitalist classes as well as social groups and indigenous communities.

In any case, anti-capitalist sentiments and thinking appear to be gaining ground in different countries to significantly different degrees, and in academia and social movements, particularly those in Latin America; therefore, it is possible that we find ourselves now in a system which is beginning to move into the ‘back loop’ (Schumpeter 2015). At this point, an essential strategy in the ‘hazy’ and subsequent ‘transparent’ context, in which institutionalised systems and beliefs are openly being challenged, is allowing new ideas and understandings to emerge (Westley et al. 2013). Here, indigenous groups and grassroots social movements are implied to play another key role, that of shaping the design of the post-capitalist future system (Löwy 2015; Kovel 2008b). These peoples’ connectedness to nature assumedly forms values that reflect respect for the environment and the maintenance of sustainable practices; thus, they become a source of creativity and experimentation for the new system being designed. This notion recalls the work by Max-Neef (1992) on barefoot economics, which proposes to engage with those people who are on the periphery of, or excluded from, the capitalist economic system, in order to construct a more humble economic system that builds on their ecocentric values (Imas et al. 2012). Therefore, indigenous groups and social movements, in various associations with urban and rural working classes and other critical activisms, constitute essential transformative agents which bridge the gap between local action, wider engagement and actualised social reform, as this requires making the step from critique to construction, and from opposition to proposition (Pieterse 1997).
Supporting such activities by social groups and indigenous peoples, the Réseau Ecosocialist Manifesto, adopted by a Quebec-based ecosocialist movement, also identifies left-wing political parties as key agents, particularly throughout the ‘hazy’ and ‘transparent’ contexts, as their outlined activities include creating spaces for involvement, and accumulating resources and ideas. These initiatives are vital to the convergence and sense-making activities, which need to occur through the ‘hazy-transparent’, context to allow a transition to the ‘front loop’. While this could possibly be achieved by indigenous groups, social movements and others acting together, it is arguably more likely to be successful when there is a designated party or organisation to lead these activities, particularly those which already have the relevant resources and experience at their disposal, such as political parties. However, caution is required here. In the so-called Western world, there has been a notable decrease in the popular support for left-wing political parties, with some political scientists using the term ‘pasokification’ to describe this continent-wide shift in Europe; the term was coined following the crashing support for the Greek left-wing political party Pasok from a steady 45% to 4% in 2015 (The Economist 2016). Additionally, the political Left in many Western countries appears to have lost much of its identity, discourse and legitimacy, and is therefore less likely to join those groups that are directly challenging the institution of capitalism. Indeed, corporatist theory postulates a social domination model where those organisations opposed to capitalism, like left political parties and unions, are progressively integrated into an institutional structure of social control, ultimately leading to class collaboration as opposed to the more conventional class struggle predicted by Marxists (Lichten 1984; Stephens 1986). In light of this, it is perhaps unlikely that the ecosocialist transition will begin in the Global North. The situation is different in Latin America, where social programmes introduced by left-wing political parties retain popular support, although in more recent times these parties appear to be in state of flux due to the mounting contradictions of formal democracy and

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1 Although the reasons behind Pasok’s downfall are considerably more complex than simple declining faith in the political left in Greece.
conventional policymaking (Bremmer 2017; The Conversation 2017; Ioris 2017, 2019; Kozloff 2016).

While the Réseau Ecosocialist Manifesto identified left-wing political parties as important transformative agents, particularly due to their available resources and leading capabilities, it rejects the potential of states and corporations to act as agents in the ecosocialist movement. In contrast to this, Ecuador’s National Plan for Good Living (2013–2017) provides an interesting contribution to ecosocialist literature, as it identifies the state as the main transformative agent; although this is unsurprising, given that it is a plan issued by the Ecuadorian government (likely to be significantly amended since the recent presidential election). It is also the first ecosocialist document encountered by the authors that gives significant consideration to the important step of institutionalisation of a new systemic design—that of an ecosocialist system; this process is essential in the ‘transparent’ context, in order for the SES to transition to an ‘opaque’ context in which the new post-capitalist model has become well established. Ecuador’s National Plan stipulates that the state is primarily responsible for institutionalising the changes set out in its Plan, many of which are based on the principles of Sumak Kawsay, the concept of a society where people live in harmony with each other and with their environment, and one which heavily mirrors the goals of ecosocialism. Indeed, Wall (2010: 138), one of the few ecosocialist scholars who acknowledges the importance of the state as a transformative agent, emphasises that, although ‘an obvious starting-point is to stress the vital importance of working-class and indigenous agency’, state-level power is ultimately imperative ‘in order to transform the structure – legal, social, economic and even physical – necessary for the transition to an ecosocialist society’ (ibid.: 143).

In addition to this, through the implementation of Ecuador’s National Plan, the state aims to create an active citizenry which is critical and conscious, characteristics of key transformative agents; thus, the state is said to be carrying out its ‘educative’ function described by Gramsci (Daldal 2014), despite all the intrinsic difficulties associated with the political pressures that involve and pervade the state apparatus (Ioris 2014). In the Ecuadorian plan, priority is being given to investing in generating capacities and also providing platforms through which citizens can participate
in and influence decision-making. In this manner, the state is not only a transformative agent but also acts in an intermediary manner as ‘the main agent for collective action’, that is, conducting convening and sense-making activities, crucial in the transition from a ‘hazy’ to a ‘transparent’ context (Senplades 2013: 47). Furthermore, the aim to create an active and critical society enshrined in the plan implies that the states seeks to facilitate an almost cyclical or iterative process, whereby social actors are made capable of challenging, as well as transforming, the established institution. A society with such capabilities is indisputably important, particularly given the fact that an ‘ideal’ system can never truly be achieved, and socio-economic institutions will always require refinement and adjustments.

Despite the potential transformative ability of the state, it tends to be heavily neglected or even rejected in ecosocialist writings, likely a result of the influence of the red-green theory foundation of ecosocialism, which views the state as primarily upholding capitalist interests (Burkett 2006; Pepper 1993). In contrast, Wall (2010: 141) emphasises that ‘to get to this ecosocialist society, the state must be transformed; it cannot simply be ignored’. Indeed, the significance of this statement is enhanced when recalling that the hegemony of capitalism is maintained by the dialectical interplay of coercion and consent, and that the power of legitimate coercion is a unique attribute possessed by the state (Upchurch and Mathers 2012). And, if we apply the orthodox Marxist view of the state acting as a tool of the capitalist bourgeois to maintain capitalism’s hegemony, the transformation of the state into one with an ecosocialist ontology would theoretically undermine this relationship between the former and the state. Indeed, to disregard the state would be to overlook the distinct opportunities it presents for the ecosocialist movement. The contemporary state, informed by the Hegelian political theories, adopted a ‘greener’ appearance, but at the cost of avoiding any fundamental change of core state commitments; it means that calls for governance and democracy that avoid tackling the distortions and ideological biases that underpin current-day environmental responses tend to reinforce and, consequently, perpetuate socio-ecological contradictions and environmental injustices (Ioris 2014). Indigenous groups and social movements are undeniably key transformative agents, most prominently in the
prefiguration stage of ecosocialism; however, consideration of transformative agency beyond this stage, to that in which the radical changes demanded by ecosocialism are refined and institutionalised, is essential. In light of this, the state should perhaps be considered as another potential key actor in ecosocialism, one which plays a dual role in any large-scale transitional process, both enabling and encouraging social reform, and also institutionalising it. It is also possible that transformation of the state’s ontology would significantly impinge on the ideological hegemony of capitalism. The fundamental antinomies of flexibility and legitimacy of contemporary environmental policies need to be situated in this wider politico-ecological debate about the substantial transformation of the actually existing state apparatus. The key ontological and political question is less how the state deals with the environmental policies and strategies per se, but what its ultimate commitments are and how it works to reinforce or eliminate processes of exclusion and exploitation (Ioris 2015).

In sum, the framework set out in the study by Westley et al. (2013) provides a solid basis for visualising the lengthy process of ecosocialist design, reform and institutionalisation of a post-capitalist system and the myriad of agents creating such a transformation. It allowed for gaps in certain ecosocialist documents to be identified in terms of the range of actions that will be required to bring about lasting ecosocialist reform and the transformative agents who will carry out such initiatives. For instance, the Belém Declaration only focused on activities that need to take place in an opaque context and neither the agents outlined nor their actions seek to fulfil different parts of the cycle. Moreover, there was often a notable gap between the designated actors and their actions, and the outlined ecosocialist design. The Belém Declaration focuses solely on indigenous and social groups that are charged with creating disturbances, while its proposed goals include changes such as the ‘provision of an extensive free public transportation system’ or ‘drastic and enforceable reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases’ (Angus et al. 2009: 3). Not only is it questionable how such goals can be achieved by the designated actors, but there is no consideration for the various activities that are required in order to realise these goals. In contrast, the agents outlined in the Réseau Ecosocialist Manifesto account more fully for the different activities, which need to take place throughout the cycle from the current
‘front-loop’ through to a new one, pertaining to those activities carried out by social and indigenous groups as well as left-wing political parties. The state, however, is viewed with mistrust and is rejected as an agent. On the other hand, the National Development Plan of Ecuador places the responsibility of instituting change on the state, in terms of both its education function and institutionalising the principles of Sumak Kawsay (as mentioned in other chapters of this book, please note equivalent concepts informing the political agency of indigenous groups in South America, as Küme Mongen for the Mapuche or Téko Porá and Téko Joja for the Guarani). Additionally, through the discussion, the possibility emerged of the transnational capitalist class, constituting a vital agent in the ecosocialist transition, particularly in the transition from an opaque to a hazy context, that is, overcoming the ideological hegemony that pervades much of society; however, it is likely that the international affluent classes will have to be significantly affected by the problems created by capitalism before they assume any transformative role in an ecosocialist transition.

It is worth noting the five transformative agents featured in this discussion based on an analysis of two ecosocialist manifestos and Ecuador’s National Plan for Good Living (2013–2017): social movements, indigenous groups, the affluent capitalist class, left-wing political parties and the state. The transformation and transition to an ecosocialist system will require a wide range of actions, and thus, a full spectrum of actors to perform such actions. In addition to those mentioned here, consideration of the potential transformative agency of the working class, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists and other such actors would increase the depth of discussion. Thus, there is a need for ecosocialist authors to consider a wider spectrum of transformative agents in connection with the multi-layer and multi-sectoral actions, which are required in order to bring about lasting and large-scale solutions (Carvalho 2006; Wall 2010). Thus, there is also a need for a more enhanced discussion on the arc of actions, which will be required for a successful transition beyond the mere beginning of challenging the established institution of capitalism.
Transformative Agency and Power Resources: A Case Study

Based on the available ecosocialist literature, determination of which agents of change are to play a key transformative role in ecosocialism appears to have been heavily shaped by consideration of their perceived social power. Power clearly plays a predictive role in the evolution of human societies, and there is an obvious relationship between transformative agency and social power (Dowding 2012; Hearn 2014). In order to examine this relationship further, particularly in the context of transformative agents in ecosocialism, a stakeholder power analysis was conducted on the case of the Belo Monte Dam (BMD), based on the method developed by Mayers (2005) and adapting the power resources framework created by Korpi (1985). This particular case study was selected because the social actors involved included the majority of those referenced in ecosocialist texts and identified in this research. It therefore provided a practical example through which to analyse the different degrees of their transformative agency based on events which spanned decades.

During this time, the country of Brazil underwent two important transitions which had significant implications for the BMD project and the agents involved: a political transition from a military regime to a democracy and an economic transition from import-substituting industrialisation to the model of neoliberalisation (Saad Filho 2014).

The BMD on Brazil’s Xingu River was initially proposed in 1975 under Brazil’s military dictatorship. A region that makes up 54.4% of Brazilian territory and encloses 78% of the reserve of national freshwater was considered by the dictatorial government guilty by its geography and ‘condemned’ to go through a process of water development (a risky endeavour, taking into account the region’s particularities, especially the extensive plains and complex socio-ecology). Note that the Amazon, despite the incredible amount of surface water (around a fifth of the planet’s freshwater), is quite ill suited for dams, and swaths of land and forest have been flooded in exchange for relatively little electricity. The largest scheme built during this first phase was Tucuruí (inaugurated in 1984), which generates electricity especially for aluminium smelting. The
project received very limited environmental consideration, as it was com-
mon for all projects advanced by the military government (although it
has changed only superficially after the introduction of more comprehen-
sive environmental regulation in the 1990s). During the filling of the
Tucuruí reservoir, a large quantity of trees was left in the area and then
inevitably died, leading to a massive release of methane from their decom-
position. With the construction of the Tucuruí Dam, 2430 square kilo-
metres of forest were flooded and more than 33,000 people (besides the
indigenous population) had to be resettled. The scheme also inundated
part of three indigenous areas (Parakanã, Pucuruí and Montanha), the
effect of which was added to the impact of the transmission lines on their
land; in addition, the artificial Tucuruí Lake led to the extinction of vari-
ous biological species and to the proliferation of water-borne illnesses.
Many of these problems remain unsolved and were again present in the
next phase of dam construction.

A second phase of dam engineering was more focused on politico-
economic adjustments and that coincided with the neoliberal reform of
the Brazilian State in the 1990s. The contradictions of the state-led model
of development—implemented in Brazil along most of the twentieth
century and intensified by the military governments, making use of for-
eign savings through loans from multilateral banks—had resulted in
growing economic inefficiencies and reliance on the continuous injection
of capital by the state. Along the lines of the liberalising institutional
changes introduced by the Real Plan, both generation and commerciali-
sation of energy became then available to private national entrepreneurs,
increasingly associated with international investors or energy companies.
Because of the changing role of the state apparatus, increasingly focused
on pro-private sector incentives, instead of direct construction and opera-
tion (which, nonetheless, continued to occur, despite the neoliberal dis-
course), very few hydropower schemes were built during the second
period. Coordination and decision-making became significantly diffused
across many agencies, without the presence of a centralised, well-equipped
agency as during the military dictatorship.

More recently, since 2003, the Amazon hydropower sector has pro-
vided an emblematic demonstration of the choreography of continuities
and adjustments. In the Madeira Basin, after a lengthy political dispute,
the Jirau and Santo Antônio plants were licensed in July 2007, allowing
the overflow of up to 529 square kilometres. The two schemes have
affected several indigenous groups, such as the Karitiana, Karipuna,
Urueu-Wau-Wau, Katawixi and also other isolated, unnamed tribes
(some living only six miles from the Jirau dam) who were forced to
migrate to new lands, where they clash with *garimpeiros* (wildcat miners)
logging companies, and are exposed to diseases to which they had no
immunity. The more contentious project was Belo Monte—the largest
hydropower scheme entirely within the Brazilian territory—which has
attracted great publicity in the international media (e.g. 29 articles posted
by BBC News alone between 2010 and 2017). Belo Monte, still under
construction, demonstrates that the neoliberalising platform was being
cleverly adjusted to fulfil neo-developmentalist goals. It also epitomised
the revival of the construction of large hydroelectric power plants in the
Amazon and the encroachment of Brazilian energy demands upon neigh-
bouring nations (because some schemes have flooded Bolivian land, and
Brazilian construction companies are deeply involved in projects in Peru,
Venezuela and other countries). The project was partly inaugurated in
2016, with 11,233 megawatts of installed capacity and a cost of more
than US$13 billion. After its completion, Belo Monte will be the third
biggest hydropower plant on the planet, just behind Itaipu (inaugurated
in 1984 on the border between Brazil and Paraguay) and the Three
Gorges Dam in China.

The Belo Monte project, with another name (Cararaô), was originally
conceived by the military in 1975, but could not go ahead due to the
collapse of the regime and its growing financial and political problems.
The residents of Altamira (near the site of the dam) and the indigenous
people keep up a resistance that is organised and quite influenced by the
traumatic experience with Tucuruí. There was a large gathering in 1989
with more than 1000 participants, including more than 600 indigenous
people, which managed to attract international attention to the dispute
and led to the cancellation of a World Bank loan under negotiation
(Carvalho 2006). The proposal was revisited by the neoliberal adminis-
tration of President Cardoso, but it was only really implemented by the
government of Presidents Lula and Dilma. A consortium of state-owned
companies (called Norte Energia [more details at http://norteenergiasa.
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com.br]) won the contract to build Belo Monte and manage it for 35 years. It is actually bewildering that the Lula government included many energy and environmental authorities who for a long time fiercely opposed this and other similar projects in the past. The government had to respond to the criticism raised by environmental groups and local communities (including important Indian groups) that managed to form an international coalition against Belo Monte (that included Hollywood stars and famous artists). Capacity and transmission lines were reduced, and the new design removed the sizeable reservoir, in order to minimise the negative impacts. Moreover, the controversial features of Belo Monte continue to stir protest and serious resistance (Ioris 2020).

The project was the object of a lengthy battle in the courts, which led to repeated interruptions of the construction and operation (the last interruption ordered by a judge occurred in 2017, but local groups also regularly occupy the site of the dam to protest against the unresolved problems associated with the project). The most controversial issue is related to actual viability of the project without other supporting dams upstream. Due to the long dry season and the resulting long period of low flows in the Xingu River Basin (a common feature of eastern Amazon rivers), Belo Monte has a low operation and economic performance if operating as a single dam. It means that a cascade of dams is necessary, but this would magnify the impacts on indigenous land, natural parks and farms. The national government has guaranteed, on many occasions, that Belo Monte is the only large-scale dam of the Xingu River, but the wider problem for the Brazilian society is the low legitimacy and eroded trust in public authorities. This is a global phenomenon that seriously impacts on the quality of the formal democracy of many countries, Brazil included. Similar reassurances were given in relation to the construction of other schemes in the Amazon, such as the 43 large dams to be implemented along the (even more vulnerable and controversial) Tapajós River by 2022 (Fearnside 2015). Those dams are directly benefiting from the friendly interpretation of the legislation and lax enforcement of water and environmental regulation, which means that several indigenous reserves and conservation areas will be flooded and degraded.

It is evident that the interests of the construction and business sectors for new infrastructure projects in the Amazon contrast with the persistent
disregard for public participation and social demands, which reveals the contradictory and asymmetric priorities of the state. The granting of environmental and water licences, as much as public consultation required for the approval of the project, was notoriously undemocratic and strongly pushed forward by the federal government under the justification that economic growth needed additional sources of energy. It is estimated that Belo Monte displaced between 20,000 and 50,000 people (including many families left behind after the collapse of rubber production in the early 1900s), while only one-third of the compensation promised by the authorities was ever paid (Anderson 2017). For many activists and local communities, there is a distinctive feeling of betrayal and deception associated with Belo Monte, especially because of the strange new alliances formed between left-wing politicians and conservative economic and political groups (Melo 2016). The election of Lula, an important union leader, had raised great expectations, but once in office, his government (2003–2010) was allied with the most archaic and corrupted politicians and construction companies in the country. It was not coincidence that the approval of Belo Monte involved systematic diversionary operations employed to divide the opposition and, at the same time, to legitimise the controversial project. During the Dilma government (2010–2016), which succeeded Lula’s, the secret service was even asked to spy indigenous leaders, anthropologists and social movements that opposed the construction of Belo Monte (Valente and Bragon 2017).

Due to the associated environmental and social consequences, the BMD project has been the focus of intense controversy since its inception, sparking substantial opposition from affected groups, extending to and including citizens, groups and NGOs at the national and international level. For the purposes of this research, the social actors involved were divided into two groups based on their response to the project: the pro-dam and anti-dam groups. Both are constituted of a wide variety of actors, ranging from local to national and international agents, but supported by contrasting types and different degrees of power resources. These are summarised in Table 9.1.

The power of the anti-dam actors stemmed primarily from their shared ideology, the belief that the environmental and social impacts of the BMD outweighed any benefits from the project. Ideological power, as a
| Stakeholders                              | Category    | Role                                                                 | Primary resource(s)                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brazilian government                     | Primary     | Pro-dam as part of its development strategy and to provide energy to the region | Physical capital, financial resources, means of violence and regulatory             |
| Norte Energia S.A. Consortium            | Primary     | Consortium of public and private corporations in charge of dam construction and operations | Physical capital and financial resources                                            |
| State police                             | Primary     | Responsible for enforcing orders from the state                       | Means of violence                                                                   |
| Indigenous groups                        | Primary     | Opposition to the dam to preserve their land and their culture       | Ideology                                                                           |
| Local fishermen and small-scale farmers  | Primary     | Opposition to the dam to protect their livelihoods and subsistence  | Ideology                                                                           |
| International corporations (operating within Brazil) | Secondary | Corporations dependent on dam’s construction for the increased energy to sustain energy-intensive industries | Physical capital and financial resources                                            |
| Other nations                            | Secondary   | Own shares in corporations involved in dam construction              | Money                                                                              |
| Active national citizens                 | Secondary   | Opposition to dam in support of local and indigenous groups          | Ideology                                                                           |
| International community                  | Secondary   | Opposition to dam in support of local and indigenous groups          | Ideology                                                                           |
| FUNAI (National Indian Foundation)       | Secondary   | Government body responsible for policies relating to indigenous peoples and is charged with preventing invasions of indigenous territories by outsiders | Regulatory                                                                         |

(continued)
power resource, is characterised by a large domain (the number of actors who are receptive to it) but a narrow scope (the range of activities of other actors that can be punished or rewarded via the resource) (Korpi 1985). Indeed, it is traditionally considered to be less powerful in the face of financial resources, physical capital and means of violence, power resources which have both a large domain and wide scope. These latter resources were embodied by the national state, Norte Energia and the World Bank, the main actors in the pro-dam camp. However, when the project was first proposed, the opposition from indigenous and local people, NGOs and the international community proved to be successful in its lobbying of the World Bank, leading to cancellation of its loan to the federal government, causing the project to be shelved (Xing 2013). While this could demonstrate the potential power of ideology when large groups of people are mobilised, Carvalho (2006) attributes the success of the anti-dam campaign not to the opposition movement itself but to the timing. The late 1980s constituted a crucial moment for the World Bank, as it was under much scrutiny for its poor environmental performance, and following the cancellation of the loan, the Brazilian government was not in a position to finance the project itself. This highlights the importance of context when considering the transformative potential of agents.

Following this, the design of the BMD project was amended to decrease flooding and increase capacity, and proposed again in the early 2000s. Despite the previous success of the anti-dam movement, different circumstances resulted in the eventual full licensing of the BMD (the scheme is expected to be completed by 2019). The government announced

| Stakeholders                         | Category | Role                                      | Primary resource(s)        |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| UN Human Rights Council              | Tertiary?| Published statements denouncing Brazil’s treatment of indigenous groups | (Minimal) regulatory       |
| International Labour Organisation    | Tertiary?| Upholds the rights of indigenous people (ILO 169) | (Minimal) regulatory       |
that the Brazilian National Development Bank (the main development bank, owned by the federal government) would finance 80% of the project, demonstrating the significant increase in the state’s financial resources and thus its autonomy from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank (Xing 2013). The plans for the BMD were again met with strong opposition from the anti-dam coalition, their power still primarily based on ideology, with the aim to stop construction. However, the new financial strength of the state and Norte Energia created a more pronounced power asymmetry between the two sides, allowing the state to resist the protests at all levels, including the international level, where it bypassed the temporary injunctions, resulting from the anti-dam’s coalition to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and the International Labour Organisation (Cato 2013; D’Elia 2012). On 7 November 2018, a delegation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited the region and, at the end, urged the Brazilian government to immediately resolve the grave violation of the basic human rights of indigenous peoples and riparian communities living close to the BMD. Unfortunately, the new Brazilian government, in power since January 2019, was elected with a strong anti-indigenous and anti-minorities manifesto, which has included the cancellation of any new recognition of indigenous lands, and also a clear policy of utility privatisation and minimum environmental regulation.

This may be demonstrative of the supremacy of financial capital as a power resource over ideology, particularly in today’s capitalist economies in which accelerated economic growth is the main concern. Financial resources and physical capital certainly presented advantages over ideology as power resources in the case of the BMD. The latter has a low mobilisation and storage potential, implying that over long periods of time—the protests spanned three decades—the ability of ideology to provide significant power is reduced, particularly when engaged in an ad hoc fashion (Korpi 1985). As a result, the second wave of protests constituted a more diffuse coalition and less visible action than in 1989 (Carvalho 2006). Others also noted division among indigenous and local groups, some of which were materially enticed by the state to neutralise key activists, indicating that ideology may be compromised by other more material resources (Barrionuevo 2010; Bratman 2015; D’Elia 2012;
Watts 2014). Should ecosocialism rely exclusively on similar groups of agents, that is social movements and indigenous people (as is the prevailing view in ecosocialist literature), to further the movement’s goals and eventual transition to a post-capitalist society, their power resources would have to include more than a shared ideology, in order for them to succeed, for this has shown to decrease in momentum and power over time. And ecosocialists, in contrast with orthodox Marxist scholars, favour a more gradual transition process, implying that transformative agents will require power resources with a high storage potential, these being physical and financial capital and regulatory power (Kovel 2008a, b; Holloway 2010).

In light of the dependency of agents’ transformative potential on their respective power resources, the role of the state as a transformative agent becomes interesting due to its dual characteristic; it is both an agent that effects change and is also an agent that can enable or restrict other agents due to its regulatory power, that is, its role as a major distribution of power resources, and its power of legitimate coercion. The state creates and upholds the structures of society, which determine the power of agents, as they constitute the organisationally defined social means to power resources. Through defining property rights and controlling market regulations, the state can theoretically even exert influence on the economic behaviour of organisations and corporations, thereby extending its power to the economic elite, those agents that, in a capitalist society, are characterised by a high concentration of power resources (Nasra and Dacin 2010; Scott 2013). Moreover, the internationally prevailing neoliberal paradigm appears to have institutionalised a modus operandi, which restricts the state’s power and thus further reduces the possibility that the state would take actions that run contrary to capitalist interests (Teeple 2000).

Indeed, it could be argued that the Brazilian state’s support of the BMD project through its National Development Bank demonstrates its adherence to the neoliberal paradigm and to capitalist interests (emphasis on the growth of the national economy creates an ever-increasing demand for energy to support it). The emergence of the left-wing movement in Brazil in the 1980s led to the dismantling of the elitist party system that dominated national politics and began the substantial process of
democratisation of decision-making and the creation of opportunities for public participation; Guedes de Oliveira (2010) terms this Brazil’s ‘counter-hegemony’. Despite this, however, the state’s adherence to the neoliberal paradigm significantly reduced the agency of social groups through the ‘restoration of class power’, particularly as a result of strict property rights and the progressive neutralisation of labour unions (Harvey 2005, 2006). This has led to the concentration of financial resources and physical capital in the hands of the economic elite, the characteristic distribution of power resources in capitalist societies, as these are the agents that own and control the means of production. Therefore, while democracy may have been established at the political level in Brazil, the capacity of agents to effect the change they desired in the case of the BMD was still restrained due to the state’s adherence to the neoliberal paradigm and its subsequent distribution of power resources, which allowed one group (the economic elite) to maintain its hegemony, thus undermining Brazil’s ‘counter-hegemony’ (Saad Filho 2014; Vanhanen and Kimber 1994). This contradiction in political and economic structures recalls the arguments outlined in support for ‘economic democracy’, in which the structure of the economy is redesigned to engender democratisation, a condition which would be fundamental to ecosocialism (Dolack 2012; Pepper 1998).

In sum, the BMD project provided an interesting, and intriguing, case through which to examine a significant attribute of transformative agency: the power of different actors and how this pertains to their potential contribution in the ecosocialist transition. Empirically based observations drew attention to the varying levels of impact these groups can have, impacts which are dependent on the context and the power resources of the agents. Ideology, employed by social movements and indigenous people, was proven to be a persuasive force, particularly when the opposing actors faced uncertain financial resources. However, the former cannot be considered a sustainable resource and was unable to sustain its force over the four decades of the project; thus, ideology alone cannot be expected to sustain the momentum of an ecosocialist transition. The financial power of the Norte Energia and the federal state (Brazilian National Development Bank—BNDES) was seen to be a significant power resource and one which ultimately decided the fate of the
BMD project. This strengthens the argument that the state should be considered a key factor in ecosocialism, one which must be transformed as opposed to ignored.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to contribute, from the perspective of the nexus between environment and development, to a current lacuna in ecosocialist literature on transformative agency, that is, the actors who will bring about the theorised transition to a post-capitalist regime and their transformative potential as a function of their power resources. The former was explored against the framework created by Westley et al. (2013) of transformative agency within SES; this brought to attention the wide range of actions that must be executed in the transition from one SES to another, thus implying an equally diverse range of agents. The discussion focused on five transformative actors and their particular roles in an ecosocialist transition according to different contexts: indigenous groups, social movements, left-wing political parties, the state and the transnational bourgeois classes. The latter two are often disregarded in the limited ecosocialist literature that references the subject of transformative agents. However, given that they possess significant and effective power resources, and thus have a high transformative potential, the role of the state and affluent classes in the ecosocialist transition requires further research.

Indeed, both context and power resources were demonstrated to play a significant role in the transformative potential of different agents. Different contexts require different actors to take the leading role, depending on the action required at the time (e.g. political parties would take a leading role in the sense-making activities required during hazy and transparent contexts). In this regard, there is a need to further understand the complexity and political subjectivities of social actors in different socio-spatial circumstances. In addition, the effectiveness of certain power resources may also be dependent on contexts (e.g. the initial triumph of the anti-dam coalition on the basis of ideological power).
On a final point, the authors, here, would like to emphasise that, based on the earlier discussion, it would be pertinent for future research in this area to examine the transformative potential of agents in a globalised context, one which presents a number of challenges to social actions, even at the micro- and meso-scale, and has significant repercussions on the distribution of power resources. The transition which has occurred from national to global capitalism implies the need for global reform, and the predominant reforms advocated by ecosocialists (e.g. collective ownership over the means of production) could arguably only be implemented and sustained at a local or global level (Pieterse 1997; Kovel 2013; Löwy 2015). This rationale provides justification and substance to Kovel’s (2008a: 252) proclamation that ‘ecosocialism will be international or it will be nothing;.

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