

Eight Points on Ecological Delinking

Max Ajl

It is now seldom recalled that late twentieth century Nicaragua bore witness to one of the that period's most incandescent attempts at revolutionary construction. It is even more seldom noted that this was, by its own self-description, a "national and popular liberation movement," fighting for "liberation from dependency," on the one hand, and for the "liberation of the oppressed people in the nation" on the other.¹ And it is widely ignored that the Sandinista revolution was not merely about revolutionary emancipation but about revolutionary ecology. In the words of Father Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan Minister of Culture, "Not only humans desired liberation. The entire ecology cried for it. The revolution is also for lakes, rivers, trees and animals."²

What Nicaragua tried to do in practice – what it was prevented from doing by US neo-colonialism, death squads, proxy war – this note tries to explain as theory: ecological delinking or breaking from the capitalist law of value and its genetic devaluation of the labor, lives, and lands in the periphery of the world system. It also tries to impose a different matrix of values, based on the liberation of life from capitalism and neo-colonialism. It proceeds by (1) defining de-linking; (2) explaining auto-centered development; (3) clarifying what ecology adds to our understanding of

- 1 Dussel, Enrique (2022). *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861–63*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002.
- 2 Faber, Daniel (1999). La Liberación del Medio Ambiente: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Ecology in Nicaragua, 1979–1999. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 10(1), 45.

delinking and development; (4) developing the social agent of this transition; (5) highlighting the specificity of the labor required for the reproduction of the natural environment and the labor force itself; (6) asserting that, in practice, delinking always had an organic ecological component; (7) showing that this implies the non-neutrality of technology; and (8) concluding this rests on a broadly untried “peasant” path to development.

Delinking

Delinking was originally modeled by the Egyptian economist Samir Amin based on his studies of China, North Korea, and other East Asian attempts to build socialism. Delinking had three critical elements. One, nation states would relate to the external world based on internal choices reflecting the interests of workers and peasants, without regard for “world capitalist rationality.”³ Two, this rested on the political capacity to introduce deep and egalitarian social reforms. This was a condition for delinking since domestic ruling classes have no necessary interest in it. It therefore implies transferring control of the state. Three, a capacity for technological absorption and ingenuity, to put political autonomy over production into effect.

Auto-Centered Development

Delinking – the rupture from logics and priorities imposed by global capital – was a step towards a different development model: auto-centered, self-reliant, or endogenous development. This model had a number of critical elements. First, production oriented to serving the basic needs of the popular classes. Accordingly, agriculture serving industry by supplying the workers with needed goods and providing necessary

3 Amin, Samir (1990). *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. London: Zed Books, 60.

inputs for industrial production. Industry serving agriculture through providing needed consumption goods, and the technical upgrading of agriculture – tractors, harvesters, and earth movers. Agrarian reform, to democratize a basic element of production and development in underdeveloped societies. An appropriate balance of wage goods and heavy industry – needed in order to stanch the outward flow of surpluses to pay for others' technology which could not be produced locally due to the long-term heritage of unequal development⁴ yet which was needed to promote long-term productivity increases.

The Need for Ecology

While, as we will see, ecological concerns were present in the original historical experiences of delinking from which Amin abstracted, the “new” ecological concerns – in particular, metastasizing crises of biodiversity, extinction, and carbon dioxide saturating the atmosphere – intensify the need to weave ecological concerns into the fabric of delinking and auto-centered development. For the poorer world is increasingly hemmed in, ecologically speaking. Macro-climactic events like typhoons, drought, and hurricanes make it ever-more-urgent to armor infrastructure, the built environment, and agriculture to be resistant enough or supple enough to deal with such challenges. Internal choices must balance several competing needs: short-run productivity increases, securing a surplus for industrialization, the need for technological development for self-defense, and the effects such processes have on the environment, with accompanying costs for human beings' well-being, including through long-run, difficult-to-remediate ecological degradation.

4 Kadri, Ali (2019). *Imperialism with Reference to Syria*. Singapore: Springer.

Subjects and Strategies of Transition

The “subject” of transition must be theorized with a bit more flexibility than Amin’s proletariat and peasant alliance. And with a lot more rigor than contemporary discussion of the environmentalism of the poor, or extractivism. The former forgoes rigor for populism, focusing on the immediate experience of deprivation and in essence constructing a theory around it based on an essentialized vision of economic development as “protecting the commons” and an unblemished relationship with non-human nature; the latter essentially exports politics from the North to the South, sidesteps a conceptualization of national liberation, does not engage the balancing acts needed for developmental advance given the starting points of neo-colonialism’s reliance on commodity exports, lacks engagement with planning, verges on a folkloric conception of peripheral people, who no longer agitate for plans or liberation but rather localized “geographies of liberation,” and has nothing to say about the great masses of peripheral poor who decreasingly, or do not, engage in primary production.⁵

In lieu of this, we should consider a different set of subjects. In the broadest sense, this is the semi-proletariat, straddling town and country, with the goal of reclaiming natural resources and land and affirming their sovereignty over development.

[The] Evident ‘diversity’ of the new struggles (feminist, ‘indigenous’, environmentalist) are also intelligible by the commonality of their structural conditions. Pushed to the limit under neo-liberalism, the escalating contradictions have opened a new space for the direct participation of women (for whom land is the most crucial element in the social reproduction of the household); propelled to the forefront the racially oppressed (who most often constitute the bulk of the semi-proletariat); and underpinned the ideal of environmental sustainabil-

5 Ajl, Max (2023). Theories of Political Ecology: Monopoly Capital Against People and the Planet. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 12(1), 12–50.

ity with a militant social agent (given the immediate destruction of the means of subsistence of the semi-proletariat as a whole).⁶

A delinking and development strategy works from these struggles, and accounts for the oppressions confronted under the monopoly of neo-liberalism and imperialism. It therefore confronts questions of national liberation, industrialization – not least for defending socialist experiments from the attacks of monopoly capital – but without surrendering to it in the manner of the progressive/developmental governments of the 1940s–1980s. This must be nested within a new urban–rural balance that stanches rather than speeds up the flow of population from the countryside to the city.⁷

The Specific Labors of Transition

The semi-proletariat frequently has a foot in the city and a foot in the countryside. The figurative foot can extend beyond an individual into wider familial support networks. It is a class often but not always connected to non-human nature for its reproduction strategies. Accordingly, in centering this class, the delinking strategy will attend to ecology and the role of labor – in particular its role in protecting and maintaining landscapes through the active application of human energy. In turn, it ought to systematize the accounting of that labor in planning schemes as they transition away from the wage system. And it ought to likewise enfold social reproduction, which must likewise be accounted for in any popular planning regime, rather than discounted and constituting a “hidden subsidy” to the wage relation. At the current moment, such labor – frequently that of women – directly produces

6 Moyo, Sam; Yeros, Paris & Jha, Praveen. Imperialism and Primitive Accumulation: Notes on the New Scramble for Africa. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 1(2), 189.

7 Dowidar, Mohamed (1973). The Import Substitution Pattern: A Strategy of Growth within Dependency. The Possible Alternative Pattern of Development. IDEP, Dakar.

services and goods needed for survival, rather than merely for sale on the market. Such direct production of use values requires some level of “uncommodified resources, mostly lands or nature that are part of the commons.”⁸ Mounting commodification and accumulation undermines the natural resource base, undermining social reproduction.

Thus, in these cases, the defense of social reproduction and of the necessary natural conditions for social reproduction go hand in hand. We can, indeed, add that these “natural conditions” are neither historically nor in the present period simply “there.”⁹ Without claiming monistic identity between humans and non-human nature, we can insist that the types of landscapes that are part of social reproduction on a world scale, both locally and in terms of what the neoliberal jargon refers to as more systemic “eco-systemic services,” are the product of human labor: the “labour that goes into the maintenance of the forest,” for example, when it comes to the hundreds of millions of contemporary forest dwellers.¹⁰ The issue is that these forms of labor are the underside of accumulation on a world scale when it comes to social reproduction, or are simply so invisible that they are subject to possible primitive accumulation as an antecedent to land grabbing and de-population.

Delinking in History

In important ways, delinking had always been based on certain ecological practices (although not necessarily or in all places an explicit

8 Ossome, Lyn & Naidu, Sirisha (2021). The Agrarian Question of Gendered Labour. In: Jha, Praveen; Chambati, Walter & Ossome, Lyn (eds.) (2021). *Labour Questions in the Global South*. Singapur: Palgrave Macmillan, 79–80.

9 Denevan, William M. (1992). The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82(3), 369–385.

10 Prasad, Archana (2020). Global Capital and the Reinvention of Nature. In: Jha, Praveen; Yeros, Paris & Chambati, Walter (eds.) (2020). *Rethinking the Social Sciences with Sam Moyo*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 180–197. Also see Gilbert, David E. (2020). Laborers Becoming ‘Peasants’: Agroecological Politics in a Sumatran Plantation Zone. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47(5), 1030–1051.

ecological logic as was present in Nicaragua). In China, agriculture used essentially agro-ecological methods of production on a large scale through village-level self-reliance campaigns.¹¹ This included biological pest control, extensive conversion of night soil and other manure into fertilizer to sew shut ecological rifts, and large-scale terracing and labor-intensive water conservation efforts of other kinds. People's science movements were also widespread. Furthermore, appropriate technology based on tamping down the infrastructural "heaviness" the industrial upgrading of agriculture, through appropriately sized agricultural machinery or decentralized repair and modification workshops, probably lightened the ecological load of the industrial-agricultural synergy in China, and furthermore slowed down rural-urban migration, with its own accompanying ecological load based on the comparative weight of urban-biased industrialization. Delinking in China was therefore based on – without acknowledging it as such – certain ecological practices.¹²

These practices nevertheless encountered limits: some structural, some perhaps malleable. On the other hand, Chinese agriculture targeted productivity increases above all –with their ecological cost – achievable through the application of chemical fertilizers. Thus, there was little distinction in planning between landscape-preserving and landscape-eroding – in the broadest sense – agriculture practices; and labor costs tended to be evaluated based on relative contributions to short-run material production and overall yield and returns to labor. The defense of the ecology through labor-intensive or attention-intense practices did not reach the highest level of planning. Second, despite partially successful efforts to achieve a far more balanced rural-urban development path, planning, and population distribution patterns,

11 Schmalzer, Sigrid (2016). *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

12 Ajl, Max (2021). The Hidden Legacy of Samir Amin: Delinking's Ecological Foundation. In: Kvangraven, Ingrid Harvold; Styve, Maria Dyveje & Kufakurinani, Ushehwedu (eds.). *Samir Amin and beyond: The Enduring Relevance of Amin's Approach to Political Economy*. Special Issue *Review of African Political Economy* 48(167), 82–101.

Chinese development remained urban-biased, with wages higher in urban areas.¹³

This process went hand-in-hand with a heavy emphasis on industrial development. Such a bias was historically inseparable from the need for self-defense, with the US practically at the gates of China in South Korea and the threat of military encirclement imprinting itself on Chinese planning. Whether or not rapid advances in asymmetric deterrence, alongside the existence of world-scale semi-industrialized semi-peripheries, including modern China, can offer a buffer against the ecological destructiveness of these planning patterns for future attempts at ecological delinking and auto-centered development remains an open question.

Technology

Technology will need to be partially rethought as part and parcel of re-thinking development planning. It must be acknowledged that technology in its making and its spread cannot be considered socially neutral.¹⁴ Rather, its initial design reflects the class interests of those who make it, and subsequent adaptation and redeployment occur alongside class struggles over its shape and direction. It has historically been a way to reproduce polarized accumulation, not least because technological paths are interwoven with monopoly control over great portions of intellectual property. Furthermore, many technologies either require material flows at prices inseparable from the patterns of polarized accumulation, and therefore come with costs in labor hours, ecology, or simply overall material intensity that make them unsuitable for a carbon-dioxide-saturated world, and doubly so for poor countries facing capital constraints in supplying the basic needs of their populations.

13 Bramall, Chris (2008). *Chinese Economic Development*. London/New York: Routledge, 279ff.

14 Mahjoub, Azzam (1982). Technologie et Développement: Essai Sur Des Propos Hétérodoxes. *Thesis*. Université d'Aix-Marseille II.

Against this background, and in a different context, the Egyptian Minister of Planning, Ismail-Sabri Abdalla, proposed that in any effort at national planning, a technology policy was critical.¹⁵ It ought to opt for neither regression nor technology fetishism. Instead, the existing technologies should be critically appraised: whether they could be suitable as they are, usable with modifications, or should be simply abandoned. Alongside this program were uniform calls for investment in heavy industry, and metallurgy, not least for reasons of self-defense. More broadly, this would include the circular processing of agricultural raw materials using appropriate technology.

Accordingly, agriculture is a central plank of ecological delinking, with worldwide moves towards small-scale peasant-based agro-ecology, grounded in radical agrarian reforms and moves towards voluntary cooperatives where possible. Agro-ecology would be part of overall sustainable landscape management, including through agro-forestry, sustainable pasturing, and small-scale hydraulic infrastructure, ensuring a smooth melding of biodiversity and other eco-systemic functions with the need for adequate food and raw materials for secondary processing;¹⁶ it would feed directly into manufacturing at appropriate scale for basic needs – not forgetting that certain basic needs are to be met through relatively centralized industrialized production chains.

Architecture and planning are likewise elements of ecological delinking, reflecting the need for resilience and adaptation to multi-vectored environmental threats. This means thinking about ways to build with rather than against natural forces like wind and sun. Passive cooling or even semi-active cooling, as with Iran's wind towers, need active investigation and development as a millennial inheritance that could be the source of a real renaissance. Older building techniques that used insulation or the natural properties of materials to conserve heat and coolness in winter and summer respectively, as with raw-earth architecture,

¹⁵ Abdalla, Ismail Sabri (1977). *Development and the International Order Selected Papers*. Cairo: Institute for National Planning.

¹⁶ Ajl, Max (2021). *A People's Green New Deal*. London: Pluto Press.

ought to be analyzed and investigated along the Abdalla model rather than considered curios.

Peasant Paths

It is clear that ecological delinking – ecologically minded delinking – must be based on a Peasant Path to development in the 21st century. While variations of “villagization” have been attempted in Cambodia and Tanzania, they have been unsuccessful, lacking an effective strategy for rural industrialization, and overly coercive. However, even they have been the exceptions. More broadly, such a path has been essentially untried with the exception of 1949–1978 China. In the present moment, it is telling that the most vibrant anti-systemic struggles¹⁷ – whether they have taken state power, as in Venezuela or Bolivia, or been helped by the state, as with the massive anti-racist agrarian reform in Zimbabwe, or the ongoing and criminalized people’s war in the Philippines, or the wars of national liberation struggling for national or national-popular sovereignty, as in Yemen and Palestine – crystallize the agrarian questions of land, peasants, nation, and indeed, perhaps sovereign industrialization, as with recent moves by Zimbabwe to lock in value from minerals.

Such a peasant path has a greater possibility for relatively decentralized renewable energy deployment and usage through the less dense but quite abundant flows of energy constantly moving through the environment. It furthermore requires human attention for natural resource and landscape management. And it turns on in situ processing of primary production towards a slightly “lighter” path of manufacturing and industrialization, one which seeks a “style of development”¹⁸ appropriate to a

17 Moyo, Sam; Jha, Praveen & Yeros, Paris (2013). The Classical Agrarian Question: Myth, Reality and Relevance Today. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 2(1), 93–119.

18 Sachs, Ignacy (1974). Ecodesarrollo: Un Aporte a La Definición de Estilos de Desarrollo Para América Latina. *Estudios Internacionales* (7)25, 57–77.

world where many still lack basic needs, capital shortfalls are endemic, and further infrastructural development, including housing and city-regional planning, must begin to account for resilience and adaptation to ecological harms. Such forms require new models of popular democracy, fighting over the shape of and for the defense of the state against neo-colonial predators, external and internal alike. Such shifts will require a rebirth of regionalism – most advanced in Latin America, burgeoning in East Asia, operative in military terms in the eastern Arab Iranian region, and growing through tighter ties in West Africa. Such is an agenda that treats the nation-state not as a straightjacket but as scaffolding, and democracy not as an antagonist but as an ally. These steps can produce a form of delinking suitable for the peoples of the South in the 21st century.

