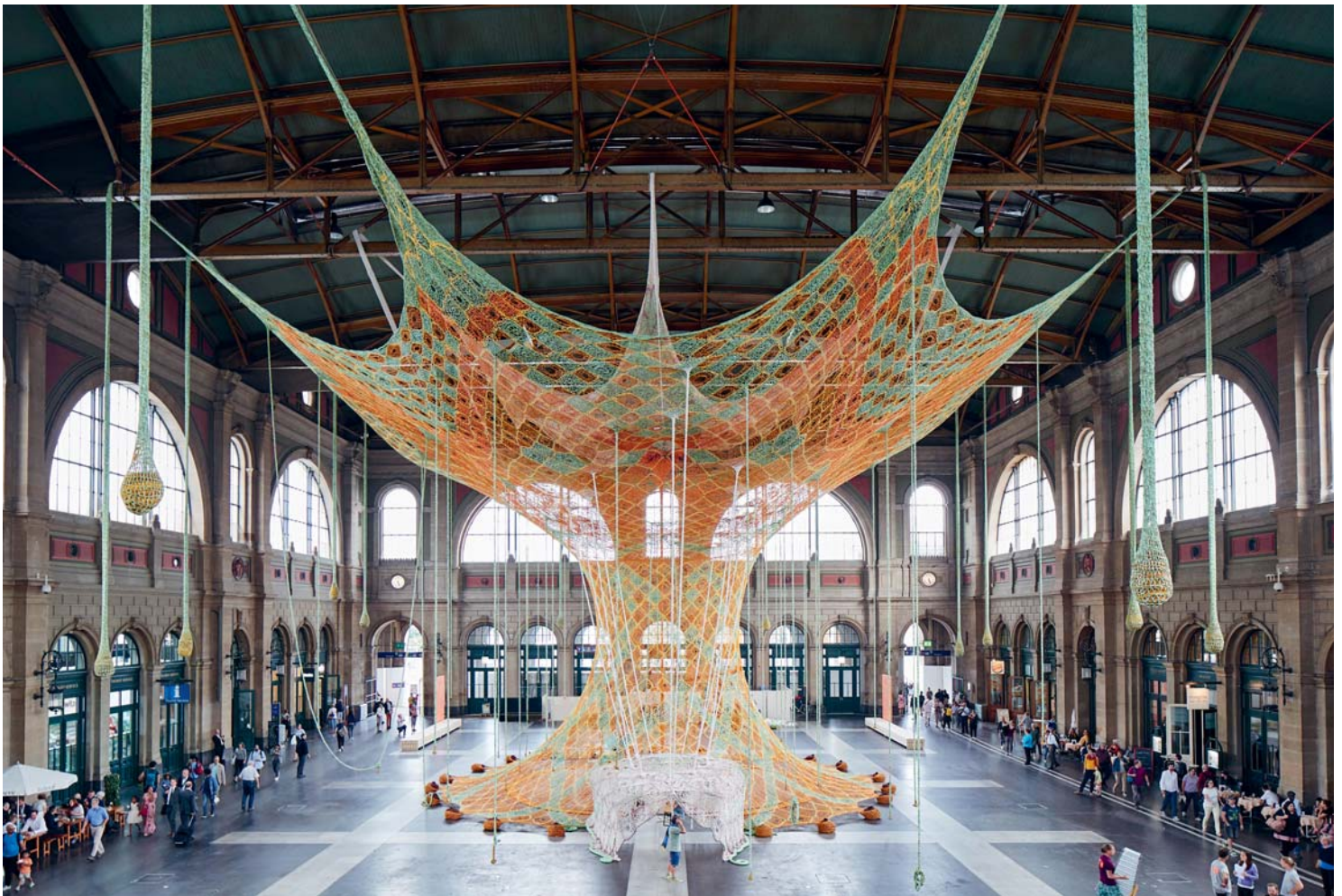


# GAIA

3 | 2018

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SCIENCE AND SOCIETY  
ÖKOLOGISCHE PERSPEKTIVEN FÜR WISSENSCHAFT UND GESELLSCHAFT



- IMPERIAL MODE OF LIVING AND SUSTAINABILITY
- URBAN TRANSFORMATION ON THE RIGHT TRACK?
- CHALLENGES OF TD PROJECT DESIGN

# Marx for Environmentalists: Rise Up! Speak Up! Insist!



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Modern civilisation is at a crossroads. Dominant forces in society are well underway to destroy the living conditions for human and non-human beings. The current trajectory of three to five degrees of global warming means to turn Earth into Venus, that is an uninhabitable planet<sup>1</sup>, with the most vulnerable beings hit first. Climate change is not about saving ice bears or more summery days, but sustaining food production and preventing wars. We know so much, yet act so little. Why? I am an ecological economist who turned to Marxian Political Economy due to its realistic economics and explanatory power<sup>2</sup>. Walking through the world with a Marxian lens helps me make sense of it.

200 years after Marx's birth the world has changed, yet it has remained the same. We are still living in a system called capitalism, the essence of which Marx was good at explaining. It is a system primarily steered to produce monetary incomes, as profits, rents and interest. To remain competitive, firms invest in technologies that increase labour productivity. This drives prices down and spurs the appetite for cheap energy and resources even more (ideally subsidised or for free). Such core drivers of capitalism explain why social and political barriers to sustainability transitions persist.

Marx was a systems thinker and realist, but also a visionary. He wanted to understand capitalism – with a view to changing it. What can we learn from Marx to transcend unsustainability traps? Three leverage points for change inspired by his work are:

- 1. Prioritise what matters.** What matters for people's wellbeing and dignity is access to healthy food, decent housing, health care and education. These should be defended as human rights and provisioned by institutions whose purpose it is to ensure their direct delivery, rather than indirect provision via growth and profit-making. Water is essential, flying and owning a car are not. They are part of an imperial mode of living<sup>3</sup> that destroys life.
- 2. Confront power.** The provision of human needs for everyone cannot be taken for granted. We need to oppose powerful industries, finance, and ways of life, and hold institutions accountable for not taking systemic challenges seriously. If States allocate little effort towards climate protection, it is, in fact, not their priority. The threat of power is most insidious when invisible; it must be studied, unmasked, and resisted.
- 3. Act.** Research should be a vehicle for effective communication and radical, urgent action (e.g., banning fossil fuel extraction and use). As researchers we need to speak up, point to uncomfortable realities, proactively engage with interest groups, and steer decisions in our realms (divestment, travel, teaching).

Environmentalists call for social-ecological transformation, Marx called for revolution; both mean essentially the same. The world is already transitioning towards a new order, but the outcome is still unclear. "A descent to barbarism [...] is just as possible as the attainment of a rational society"<sup>4</sup>. Let's fight for the latter and against the former.

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1 Spratt, D., I. Dunlop. 2018. *What lies beneath? The underestimation of existential climate risk*. Melbourne: Breakthrough National Centre for Climate Restoration.  
2 Pirgmaier, E. Forthcoming. *Value, capital and nature. Rethinking the foundations of ecological economics*. PhD thesis. University of Leeds.  
3 Brand, U., M. Wissen. 2018. What kind of great transformation? The imperial mode of living as a major obstacle to sustainability politics. *GAIA* 27/3: 287–292, in this issue.  
4 Bookchin, M. 1995. *The philosophy of social ecology*. Montreal: Black Rose Books. XIV.