A Greener New Deal?

written by Ashley Dawson | January 20, 2019

Demands for a Green New Deal (GND) are a beacon of hope in an otherwise dystopian contemporary landscape. In her platform document, for example, newly elected Representative and Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez states that "it's time to shift course and implement a GND—a transformation that implements structural changes to our political and financial systems in order to alter the trajectory of our environment." Ocasio-Cortez is not alone. Other members of the insurgent left who have embraced the idea of a GND include recently elected Michigan Democrat Rashida Tlaib and Florida gubernatorial candidate Andrew Gillum. For these candidates, a GND would confront the twin threats of a brewing capitalist crisis based on stagnating wages and a biocrisis that includes not just climate change but also a massive loss of biodiversity (often referred to as the Sixth Extinction), increasing scarcity of fresh water, desertification, and loss of marine fisheries, among other crises. Traditionally, these twin threats have seemed insuperable precisely because the solution to one would exacerbate the other: Creating new jobs in order to address the economic crisis would contribute to economic growth that ravages the environment. Conversely, protecting the environment would mean cutting growth and thereby contributing to a worsening economic picture. The idea of a GND promises an exit from this contradiction through the creation of legions of good, green jobs. As Ocasio-Cortez puts it in her platform, a GND that is "based on radically addressing climate change is a potential path toward a more equitable economy with increased employment and widespread financial security for all." It's a win-win scenario.

The notion of a GND of course harkens back to the policies adopted under the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to pull the U.S. out of the Great Depression. But there is also another precedent, one that is all too seldom acknowledged in today's references to a GND: debates that circulated after the Great Recession of 2008 about how to jump-start advanced capitalist economies while also dealing with the gathering climate crisis. Prominent advocates of a GND after 2008 included the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the Green European Foundation, and the Center for American Progress. In response to the proposals put forward by these prominent progressive institutions, members of the climate justice movement articulated a number of radical critiques of the growth-oriented underpinnings of GND programs. For these critics, a GND must be centered on targeted de-growth of industrial production and a rejection of the imperial mode of living that characterizes the energy- and resource-intensive lifestyles of the wealthy in the Global North. Notions of a GND that remain tethered to a capitalist economic system predicated on ceaseless compound growth rates, climate justice activists argued, would simply exacerbate the underlying biocrisis. These critiques of proposals for a GND are freshly salient in the context of efforts by insurgent socialists in the U.S. today to offer solutions to the twin economic and environmental crises of contemporary capitalism.

In what follows I sketch a genealogy of the GND idea, beginning with an assessment of the highly flawed nature of the New Deal during the 1930s and continuing with a critical account of the major

GND proposals of the period following the Great Recession of 2008. The essay concludes with some suggestions about what a genuine exit from the present crisis might entail—what, in other words, a wholesale program of ecological and economic reconstruction might require. As the green think tank Bios recently noted, we currently lack viable models of economic governance since the dominant economic theories of today were all developed during an era of energetic and material abundance. It is precisely such unexamined and yet ubiquitous assumptions about ceaseless growth that we must overturn, and yet doing so raises the very serious specter of mass unemployment and attendant social turmoil. We are already faced with a global upsurge of popular authoritarianism, and we have only begun to experience the economic and ecological disruptions that the twin crisis holds in store. To suggest that there is an easy win-win approach within a capitalist economic system, that we can have our environmental cake and continue with current levels of frenetic consumption, is to cultivate the most rash form of naiveté about the increasing unsustainability of capitalism in both economic and ecological terms. It will not be enough to reframe ideas of de-growth away from overwhelmingly negative associations with locally woven, organic carrot-pants and pathogen-encrusted compost toilets to ones of abundant and meaningful time for engagement with other people in projects of collective transformation. We need to be clear that such a transformation in values must come within the context of carefully managed policies of ecological reconstruction that move us very quickly to complete energy transition while also building social resilience through the expansion of non-consumption-based sectors of the economy. Such an ecological and social reconstruction cannot take place within the framework of a capitalist economy.

New Deal Illusions

Contrary to widely accepted myths concerning the efficacy of programs such as the Works Progress Administration established under FDR during the 1930s, the New Deal did not solve the contradictions of capitalism. Unemployment spiked from 4.2 percent of the labor force in 1928 to 23.6 percent in 1932, the worst moment of the Great Depression, then fell back down to 16 percent in 1936, but climbed back up to 19 percent in 1938.[1] It was ultimately the U.S. entry into World War II and the massive, state-orchestrated transformation of the economy onto a wartime footing that dramatically brought unemployment down. In addition, despite nostalgic ideas about the "universalistic" or nonracial character of the New Deal, most New Deal policies were anything but race-neutral, or, for that matter, gender-neutral. Some programs, like the initial Social Security old-age pension program, were established on a racially invidious, albeit officially race-neutral, basis that excluded agricultural and domestic workers from coverage at a time when those categories included nearly 90 percent of Black workers.[2] Other New Deal programs, like FDR's housing policy, gave federal support to the creation and reproduction of an explicitly racially exclusive residential housing industry. This does not mean to say that women and people of color in the United States did not find ways to take advantage of New Deal policies, but again, it is hard to imagine that the benefits of these policies would have become as widely distributed as they did without the impact of wartime mobilization.

For this reason, advocacy of a GND today often slides quickly into rhetoric of full-scale social and economic mobilization along the lines of World War II. So, for instance, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's platform document states that "we need to avoid a worldwide refugee crisis by waging a war for climate justice through the mobilization of our population and our government." Environmental activist and writer Bill McKibben goes even further by declaring that "we're under attack from climate change—and our only hope is to mobilize like we did in World War II."[3] While they draw attention to the massive scale of mobilization that is now necessary in order to avoid planetary ecocide, there are some problems with such rhetoric. For one thing, it implicitly equates nature with the behavior of fascist powers like Nazi Germany. But of course climate change is not some authoritarian despot bent on totalitarian rule, but rather a result of the escalating carbon emissions

generated by a specific economic system: fossil-fueled capitalism. McKibben is not so much concerned with the exactitude of the analogy, though; what he's really trying to do is to establish the legitimacy of the kind of "wholesale industrial retooling" that took place in the United States during World War II, a retooling that in this case would involve a massive buildout of the country's capacity for renewable energy generation. McKibben cites Mark Wilson's book *Destructive Creation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) to challenge the notion that private industry rolled up its sleeves and went to war. Instead, McKibben argues, business had to be dragged into the war effort kicking and screaming, and, according to Wilson, "it was public capital that built most of the stuff, not Wall Street." If firms refused to take directions from public authorities, McKibben declares, FDR ordered them seized. In his account of a state-controlled economy dedicated to full employment, McKibben is careful to steer clear of the word socialism, but that of course is what he is advocating. And yet it is his refusal to broach this mobilizing idea that makes his plangent question of whether "we can find the collective governance will to fight back in this war against global warming, as we once fought fascism" so ironic. Surely we will never be able to mobilize our collective will for such a fight unless we are able to speak frankly about the need for institutions and forms of public governance necessary to embody that will. Such organs of collective will only emerge from widespread acceptance of the notion that solidarity and the public good are important ideals to fight for.

But the problems with invocations of the New Deal—and of wartime mobilization—run deeper. As Matt Huber has argued, the New Deal helped catalyze a wholesale transformation of life in the United States, one centered on mass consumption of cheap energy.[4] FDR believed that cheap energy was central to what he termed "abundant life," and consequently helped oversee a transformation in social and energy policies that paved the way to the culture of conspicuous consumption which dominated postwar America. During the period from 1932 to 1942, for example, the federal government spent roughly $4 billion on highway construction, creating the precedent for the 1956 Federal Highway Act and the creation of the massive U.S. interstate highway system.[5] Public funds were used during these years to create the auto-highway-suburb complex, ensuring private mobility (for white homeowners) and abundant profits for capital. No thought was given to the environmental impact of this new, sprawling geography of mass consumption, but today, with per capita carbon emissions in the United States at roughly double the levels of those in Europe, the impact is dramatically clear. In addition, this domestic geography of fossil-fueled consumption also necessitated interventionist imperial policies around the globe, an imperial cartography established when FDR met Saudi King Abdul Aziz aboard a U.S. battleship anchored in the Suez Canal in 1945. During this meeting, FDR fatefully pledged political and military support to the oil-rich dictatorship. A mobilization based on endless expansion of a capitalist economy thus generated both environmental and political outcomes whose devastating contradictions are all too evident today.

The Great Recession and Proposals for GND

A genealogy of proposals for a GND takes us back to precedents such as the Pearce Commission's *Blueprint for a Green Economy,* published in Britain in 1989, and, before that, to earlier ecological debates that include the Brundtland Report's exploration of the prospects for sustainable growth (1987) and the Club of Rome's famous report on *The Limits to Growth* (1972). As the title of the latter explicitly highlights, the contradictions between economic growth and a finite terrestrial resource base are prominent in the earlier moments of these conjoined economic and environmental proposals. For example, despite advocating sustainable growth, the Brundtland Report alludes to a tension between sustainability and economic growth that might entail making "painful choices" in order to ward off environmental collapse.

By the time of the Great Recession of 2008, however, such fears had been thoroughly banished. In its 2009 plan for a Global Green New Deal (GGND), UNEP argued that "the world economy needs the stimulus provided by a GGND because the unregulated market cannot resurrect itself on its own." The UNEP proposal thus envisages the GGND as a kind of Keynesian state-based economic stimulus package for an ailing global capitalist economy. The idea quickly garnered support from some of the key institutional incarnations of that order: the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, among others. As a liberal alternative to the draconian austerity programs imposed around the world after the 2008 crash, the GGND held many attractions for liberal commentators and members of the public. Not only did it intend to revive the world's economic fortunes, but it promised to do this through investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies that boosted the image of a clean, green capitalist order on the horizon. Yet many of the solutions advocated by the UNEP proposal were of a neoliberal stamp, including the idea of dealing with the spiraling carbon emissions caused by fossil-fuel consumption through global carbon markets. In addition, there was little understanding in the document of the underlying contradictions in measures such as improvements in energy efficiency within a capitalist context. Historically, such efficiency measures have promoted fresh rounds of economic growth rather than reduction in the cycles of material consumption.[6]

Underlying these arguments for a program of Keynesian environmentalism is the assumption that economic growth is beneficial. As the UNEP report put it, "the greening of economies need not be a drag on growth. On the contrary, the greening of economies has the potential to be a new engine of growth, a net generator of decent jobs, and a vital strategy to eliminate persistent poverty."[7] These ideas have become widely accepted, as is evident from the writing of Bill McKibben, who argues that a global mobilization to defeat climate change

> wouldn't wreck our economy or throw coal miners out of work. Quite the contrary: Gearing up to stop global warming would provide a host of social and economic benefits, just as World War II did. It would save lives. … It would produce an awful lot of jobs. … It would provide safer, better-paying employment to energy workers. … It would rescue the world's struggling economies. … And fighting this war would be socially transformative. (Just as World War II sped up the push for racial and gender equality, a climate campaign should focus its first efforts on the frontline communities most poisoned by the fossil-fuel era.)[8]

McKibben's insistence on economic and environmental justice for the frontline communities most adversely impacted by fossil capitalism is dramatically different from the priorities in the UNEP report, but his faith in the egalitarian impact of GND is not wholly distinct from the assumptions about the benefits of Keynesian stimulus to capitalist economies that underlie that report. In addition, the idea that the present hyper-consumptionist economic system should be retained through massive conversion of existing energy generation from fossil fuels to renewable energy fails to address the deeper roots of the present biocrisis, which lie in the capitalist imperative to grow ceaselessly. We all may wish for the kind of social transformation McKibben advocates, but we need to be extremely wary of GND proposals that do not imagine such transformations through a wholesale shift away from the inequalities generated by the capitalist system.

Growth only seems like a viable proposition to GND advocates because of assumptions that economic expansion can be decoupled from increasing energy consumption. This idea of decoupling is most ardently expounded by the Breakthrough Institute in its *Ecomodernist Manifesto,* which argues that "intensifying many human activities—particularly farming, energy extraction, forestry, and settlement—so that they use less land and interfere less with the natural world is the key to decoupling human development from environmental impacts." Such arguments are perplexing given the fact that the global economy is five times the size it was after World War II and is expanding at

such an exponential rate that it will be eighty times that size by 2100. As commentators such as David Harvey have pointed out, this rate of growth is totally at odds with the finite resource base and increasingly fragile environment on which humanity depends.[9] To obscure the glaring contradiction of infinite economic expansion on a self-evidently limited planet, advocates of growth typically distinguish between relative and absolute decoupling. There is significant evidence, they argue, for declining resource intensities, or relative decoupling. Over the last thirty years, for example, global carbon intensity fell from around one kilogram per dollar of economic activity to just under 770 grams per dollar.[10] But improvements such as these in carbon and energy intensity were more than offset by massive increases in the scale of economic activity in general. Not only is there no evidence, therefore, for overall reductions in resource throughput (absolute decoupling), but global carbon emissions from energy use have actually *increased* by 40 percent since 1990, the Kyoto Protocol base year. In addition, when one factors in global consumption of a range of nonfuel minerals such as iron ore and bauxite, global resource intensities have actually intensified dramatically in recent decades. As Tim Jackson explains, estimated rates of declining carbon intensity about equal projected population growth rates, but under business-as-usual scenarios, annual growth rates of 1.4 percent in income mean that by 2050 the advanced industrialized nations will be emitting *80 percent* more carbon than we are at present.[11] To make matters worse, such alarming statistics do not include estimates of carbon emissions from industrial behemoths like China, to which the West has displaced much of its industrial activities. As these statistics underline, the ecomodernists' assertions about decoupling are dramatically contradicted by the relentless increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, notwithstanding periodic downturns in the rate of emissions.

In addition, there is scant evidence to support the idea that a GND would be successful in economic terms. In fact, the outcome might be precisely the opposite, with GND programs finding their economic viability contingent on a continuation of precisely the environmentally destructive expansionist tendencies that they set out to ameliorate. Indeed, economists such as Bill Blackwater have argued that "in order for massive green investment programs to be successful as investments, they require underlying growth in the consumer economy to at least continue at the global level, and within the West, to accelerate." At the end of the day, in other words, environmental Keynesianism is predicated on economic expansion; since new growth means that fresh resources need to be exploited, any environmental benefits of more efficient technology and a transition to renewable energy will ultimately be undermined, and the biocrisis will intensify.

Another prominent element of GND proposals such as the one advanced by the Center for American Progress also merits caution: the idea that green jobs that entail higher skill levels, better working conditions, and better wages will ameliorate today's glaring economic and social inequalities. Unfortunately, evidence suggests many of the common assumptions associated with green jobs are far too optimistic. Green jobs, it should be noted, do not necessarily use fewer environmental resources. In fact, they tend to be quite resource intensive. In addition, since most green jobs are located in sectors like agriculture, construction, waste and water management, and manufacturing, there is little evidence that green jobs are better jobs than average jobs. On the contrary, statistical evidence suggests that in terms of working conditions, green jobs are actually worse than average jobs.[12] In addition to the problem of green jobs' questionable quality, there is also substantial evidence to suggest that green jobs will not improve gender inequity, since most green jobs are in sectors with extremely low female participation.

A Crash Program of Ecological and Social Reconstruction

Proposals for a GND typically advocate a raft of interventions that include not only full-scale

transition to renewable energy, but also investment in other forms of green technology, including energy efficiency, as well as the improvement of transportation and energy infrastructures. We need to fight for these transformations as a minimum condition to avert planetary ecocide, but we should be clear that by themselves they will not solve either the biocrisis or the myriad contradictions that afflict contemporary capitalism. The basic problem is that the biosphere is limited, but economic growth under capitalism is boundless. With this boundless economic growth comes necessary exploitation of nature and of frontline communities in the form of extreme extraction. Along with the forms of ruination and dispossession that attend extreme extraction, economic growth also produces toxic byproducts that decades of environmental justice struggles have shown disproportionately affect people of color in the advanced capitalist nations, as well as large swaths of the Global South.

Proposals for genuine ecological and social reconstruction, therefore, cannot simply substitute renewable energy for fossil fuels while leaving the current global system of spiraling production and consumption untouched. Instead, the growth-based presuppositions of the New Deal and environmental Keynesianism must be challenged. What we really need, in other words, is a crash program to *shrink* those sectors of the economy that are environmentally destructive, while in tandem sectors that do no environmental damage are expanded. The latter is necessary not only because unemployment must not be allowed to spike as we shift away from fossil capitalism, a development that might discredit the transition program. In addition, the so-called caring economy should be built up because it is vitally concerned with building social resilience, an absolutely essential project given the increasing climate chaos that will inevitably afflict global society given the amount of carbon already in circulation. This program should be thought of as investment in essential social infrastructure. Since these sectors of the economy disproportionately employ people who are relatively marginalized by the capitalist system, a program of building social infrastructure would also help ameliorate the galloping inequality of contemporary capitalism.

Specific concrete demands that should be advanced within a program of ecological reconstruction should thus involve not just a shift to 100 percent renewable power, but also a reduction in total energy consumption. In addition, such a program would entail a radical diminution in the imperial mode of living that characterizes elites in the Global North and South, with their mega-mansions and first-class flights around the planet. It would involve a drastic cut in the industrial production of useless products, with producers forced to guarantee the durability of anything they manufacture. It would involve the rebuilding of cities to emphasize mass transit and walkability. And it would necessarily hinge on an end to today's environmentally destructive and socially corrosive hyper-militarism.

A program of ecological and social reconstruction that involves simultaneous growth and shrinkage means that it is important to think carefully about currently popular demands such as a universal job guarantee: Might such a guarantee not lead to an expansion of destructive jobs? While it makes sense to fight against the precariousness and austerity that are central features of neoliberal capitalism, the imperative of a crash program to shrink environmentally destructive production and consumption means careful planning of the economy in a manner antithetical to dominant doctrines that represent command economies as inherently inefficient. Instead, forms of collective planning must be created that are founded in the understanding that the crash program of ecological reconstruction should *shift* the forms and conceptions of labor that are central to contemporary global capitalism. This involves not just material transformation but also a transvaluation that elevates public service and social care.

Beyond this, though, the notion of a universal job guarantee leaves current structures of excessive production and consumption untouched. In other words, it maintains the cycle of escalating production and consumption that was central to the New Deal and that was inherited by current programs of environmental Keynesianism. What we really need is not just fewer bullshit jobs, but

less work. Work at present is not just excessive but also unequal and oppressive. The average amount of work done has increased in many countries in recent decades, and it has also grown more lopsided between those who work in the formal sector (who tend to be men) and those whose work is unpaid (overwhelmingly women). As men work more, women are increasingly left alone to engage in unpaid domestic labor, fueling wider gender inequality.[13] Working less, as feminists demanded in the 1970s, could help foster a more equitable distribution of the labor of social reproduction.

In addition, it turns out that working too much also destroys the planet. A number of studies have found correlations between working hours and ecological destruction.[14] The United States has some of the longest work hours of any developed country and, not coincidentally, also has one of the highest levels of energy consumption. Excessive work, some scholars have concluded, leads to "time scarcity" that leads to "a more environmentally damaging mix of consumption and lifestyle practices."[15] Instead of staying at home and cooking a meal together, in other words, time-scarce yuppies tend to order food from take-out joints, generating masses of garbage in the process. Among 29 high-income countries, in fact, "countries with shorter working hours tend to have lower ecological footprints and carbon footprints and carbon dioxide emissions."[16] Working less, in other words, would decrease the scale of production and consumption. It would leave more time for social interaction and pleasure.

What such a program of ecological reconstruction would ultimately be reaching for, then, would be a new definition of the good life. Against the current obsession with GDP, with insatiable growth and entrepreneurial self-assertion, ecological reconstruction would involve the growth of leisure and freedom from both toxic pollution and competition.[17] As we struggle for this new definition of the good life, it is worth remembering that one of the primary demands of radicals in Congress in the early years of the Great Depression was for a thirty-hour work week. It was to forestall this demand for less work, put before Congress by Senator Hugo Black in 1933, that the National Industrial Recovery Administration, a key plank in the New Deal, was launched.[18] Collective bargaining in the search for higher wages and levels of consumption was thus substituted for less work. Today, as agitation for a GND becomes a rallying cry for many progressives, we must make sure that this fateful embrace of growth is not repeated.

Notes

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5. Huber, 40.
6. Christoph Herman, *Green New Deal and the Question of Environmental and Social Justice* (Global Labour University, 2015).
7. Edward Barbier, *A Global Green New Deal: Report Prepared for the Green Economy Initiative of UNEP* (2009), 16.
8. McKibben.
9. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 224.
10. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: The Transition to a Sustainable Economy* (Sustainable Development Commission, 2009), 49, www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=914.
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17. Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (Other Press, 2012).
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