

A DEBATE

Green New Deal: Dead end or pathway beyond capitalism?

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A Green New Deal is on everybody's lips at the moment. Barack Obama has endorsed a very general version of it, the United Nations are keen, as are numerous Green parties around the world. In the words of the 'Green New Deal Group', an influential grouping of heterodox economists, Greens and debt-relief campaigners, such a 'deal' promises to solve the 'triple crunch' of energy, climate and economic crises. Frieder Otto Wolf, an eco-socialist and early member of the German Green Party, argues that the challenge for the global movements is to hijack the Green New Deal, rather than reject it. Tadzio Mueller, an editor of *Turbulence*, and involved in the Climate Justice Action network, begs to differ. He looks instead to an emerging movement for 'climate justice'. *Turbulence* sat the two of them down for a chat, and kicked off the debate by suggesting that a Green New Deal might actually offer a weak looking global left a great opportunity.

Tadzio Mueller: Before we start looking at the crisis of the (global) left, and whether or not a Green New Deal might be an opportunity for its rejuvenation, I think there is a more important question to be answered first. Namely: to what extent is such a project a great opportunity for the rejuvenation of *global capitalism*? Profit rates (with the possible exception of those of bailed-out banks) are at rock bottom. And there is currently nothing - no sector (like cars), no technology (like IT), no process (like 'globalisation') - that is promising to push them back up again in the near future. Capital, in other words, is in crisis, and, as Nicolas Stern, author of a report on the costs and opportunities of climate change for the British government, argues, it needs 'a good driver of growth to come out of this period, and it is not just a simple matter of pumping up demand'.

At the same time, we're in the midst of another extremely serious crisis, the biocrisis: far from climate change being the only devastating socio-ecological crisis tendency currently affecting the planet, we are also facing a serious loss of biodiversity (some scientists refer to this as the 6th great extinction in Earth's history), a growing scarcity of useable fresh water, overfishing, desertification, destruction of forests, and so on. There are specific processes driving each of these crises (the destruction of specific ecosystems; too much CO₂ in the atmosphere...), but ultimately they are all the result of one central contradiction: that between the expansion of capitalist production and the requirements of human life in relatively stable eco-social systems. The biocrisis is a crisis of our life (bios), of our collective survival on a finite planet, which is driven by capital's need for *infinite* growth.

Now, the point about *any* kind of 'green capitalism', Green New Deal or not, is that it does not resolve this antagonism - because it can be resolved as little as the antagonism between capital and

labour. Rather, a Green New Deal attempts to internalise it as a 'driver of growth'. Examples of such 'drivers' include supposedly 'green' cars and 'energy-saving' technologies. But electric cars today still get their energy from burning fossil fuels – this time coal at the power plant, not gas in the tank. Also, so-called energy saving technologies are, first, frequently enormously energy-intensive to produce, whilst, second, their energy savings get eaten up as the 'saved' resources are reinvested in yet more energy-consuming activities – the so-called 'rebound effect'.

Of course, it is theoretically possible to conceive of a capitalism whose economic growth is powered by carbon-neutral fuels. But in the world of *actually-existing capitalism*, growth has always meant more energy use, more greenhouse gases, and more environmental destruction. Take the issue of climate change: the last 30 years have seen only two cases of *significant* reductions in CO₂ emissions. First, the collapse of the growth-oriented, state-socialist economies of Eastern Europe – greenhouse gas emissions from the Soviet economy fell by 40%; and second, the current global recession, which is reducing the consumption of oil and gas, and resulting in a 5% fall in global emissions levels. I am not saying that an uncontrolled collapse of the world economy, with all the social upsets that this might bring with it, is desirable. But I am certain that it is impossible to solve the biocrisis without moving beyond the growth imperative. So I do not believe that supporting a Green New Deal is a good opportunity for the left, because this project is fundamentally about restarting capitalist growth – and it is this growth that is the problem in the first place.

Frieder Otto Wolf: The current debates on the left about whether or not to support a Green New Deal are so controversial and difficult because they remind us of two unfinished issues. First, the old but never resolved question of the 'socialist transition', the transformation process from the historical epoch of capitalism to that of communism. Second, they continue a more recent debate about the relevance of green issues in leftwing politics. In this complicated context, I think that Tadzio's perspective on the multiple proposals that are currently on the table is far too simplistic. In fact, the basic idea of the Green New Deal is pretty much irrefutable as a political proposition, and impossible to attack from the left. It consists of, first, the obvious statement that the present constellation of crises presents a historical chance, call it a 'window of opportunity', for real social change; and, second, the very plausible proposition that our best chance for seizing this opportunity is to combine the economic (employment creation) and social (expanding public services) dimension of the original New Deal with a new, 'green' dimension that addresses the ecological crises already mentioned. This basic idea, in turn, has generated a wide range of different policy proposals that are not yet conclusively defined – additions and modifications are still possible.

The left should understand the proposals for a Green New Deal as a package of emergency measures to be judged according to how effective they are in addressing the immediate problems raised by the current crises; while at the same time developing a capacity to explicitly develop their potential as transitional demands and policies. This means distinguishing between the specific measures proposed, and the ideologies they are supposed to support and to advance.

Let me give some concrete examples against Tadzio's very general argument. State intervention into banks may very well be needed in order to avoid a catastrophic crisis of capitalist finance, with all the negative consequences that might imply, like the loss of pensions or savings – but it's quite another thing to bail out private investors at the cost of the taxpayer, while not achieving any effective regulation of the system. Similarly, using a pricing system as a tool for the planned reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to an acceptable level might be a good idea – while installing an emissions-trading system based on fire-sale prices and introducing a plethora of 'offset'-mechanisms is quite a different matter. State intervention in order to regulate some specific markets, or to define precise ecological limits, is in no way equivalent to creating something that could be called 'green capitalism'. Fighting unemployment by increasing government spending is something quite different from perpetuating the madness of permanent economic growth.

TM: But the question is not whether we support or reject this or that specific policy in any of the multiple proposals currently making the rounds. The question is how these specific policies are articulated into a wider politico-economic project that can fill the space left by the at least ideological implosion of neoliberalism. Any such project has to make a reasonably credible claim to addressing the crises that brought the old era to its knees. And in this situation, the function of the Green New Deal is to allow the 'need' to restart capitalist growth to be reconciled with the reality of the biocrisis. Why else would the Financial Times Deutschland have endorsed the German Green Party before the 2009 European elections, describing the party's Green New Deal-project as a 'market-friendly engine of innovation'?

Even the most progressive version of the Green New Deal, that of the Green New Deal Group, is guilty of two crucial omissions. First, it misrepresents the 'old' New Deal as a technocratic gentlemen's agreement between the 'genius' economist Keynes and the 'can-do' politician Roosevelt. In fact, that deal was fought for by a powerful workers' movement that forced the US-government's hand on many socially progressive measures - the New Deal was the outcome of bitter and frequently violent struggles. Second, it misrepresents (surely against the authors' better intellectual judgement) the relationship between capitalism and the biocrisis. According to the Green New Deal Group, it is not industrial, or fossilistic, capitalism that is to blame, but 'the current [i.e. neoliberal] model of globalisation'. Forgotten is the environmental destruction wrought by Fordism/Taylorism; ignored is the fact that the environmental movement that arose to fight this devastation predates neoliberal globalisation.

These omissions are far from accidental: they are symptomatic of the political aims of the project. First, to focus on the environmental devastation wrought by neoliberalism obscures the irreconcilable antagonism between the need for infinite growth, and the fact that we live on a finite planet. As a result, restarting capitalist growth suddenly seems like a good idea. Second, the absence of struggle in this account allows its proponents to once again tell the fairytale of a capitalism that is somehow able to harmoniously integrate all its internal contradictions, producing a win-win-win-win situation: for capital (which can turn a profit), the state (which gains legitimacy), labour (which gets good, 'green' jobs), and the environment (which is 'saved'). But when Roosevelt's New Deal temporarily stabilised the class antagonism, it was the environment (which was destroyed), the Global South (whose resources were siphoned off), and women (whose domestic labour and bodies were ever more tightly controlled) who had to pay. The Green New Deal obscures the fact that, in capitalism, there is always someone or something that is exploited.

FOW: Tadzio criticises the Green New Deal Group for telling fairytales and for forgetting history. So, first of all, it might be useful to provide some more historical perspective. I'd like to clarify something that seems to get lost in all this critique of the idea of a Green New Deal as 'growth-oriented' and ignorant of the role of struggle and antagonism. The first time the idea was used, it came from the left! When it became clear - around 1989 - that the Gorbachev project of perestroika was failing to provide a democratic, social and ecological alternative within Soviet socialism, a number of eco-socialists began thinking about a 'perestroika in the West'. This was then translated - with a number of concessions, to be sure - into the first 'red-green' project in what was then Western Germany: an attempt by the Social Democrats and the Green Party to enter into government together.

This original proposal for a 'Green New Deal' made no declarations of faith in green capitalism, but concentrated on proposing specific policies that would address the problems of unemployment, environmental degradation, and of a powerfully menacing arms race by way of a number of simultaneous and synergetic measures. Strategically, the focus was on developing an alliance between the existing labour movement and the new social movements that sprang from the rebellion of the 1960s. The eco-socialists behind these proposals hoped to open fields of debate and of

struggle which would in turn open windows of opportunity for a deeper, and ultimately socialist transformation of German society, which would avoid the historical dead-end of Soviet-type state socialism.

Historically, then, the project of the Green New Deal has not necessarily been one of capitalist renovation. It has also focussed on introducing concrete improvements, and on building broad alliances around these policies, while at the same time continuing to search for ways of overcoming the domination of the capitalist mode of production in our society.

This in turn means: we need to hijack the Green New Deal, not reject it. After all: what else is there? In the current situation, rejection could only mean one of two things, both of which are impossible to defend today. Either, that there should be no 'green' elements in any package of immediate emergency measures. Or, that we go directly for socialism, and not support any so-called 'transitional demands'.

Concerning the question of overcoming capitalism, there is an old debate on the left that was a response to the fact that the expected social revolutions of the mid-19th century did not come to pass. On the one side, 'maximalist' or 'anti-political' positions emphasised the notion of a final 'general strike' which would sweep away capitalism; on the other, defenders of 'transformist' or 'political' stances advocated a politics of transition. Since the 1890s, this older debate had been reframed, in the internal debates of Social Democracy, as a confrontation between the advocates of 'reform' (as peaceful gradualism) and the adherents of 'revolution' (as a violent overthrow of the established powers). This second phase of the debate was again renewed after the successful October Revolution in Russia, and the idea of transitional demands turned out to be a central concept for defining more specifically what Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin alike had proposed as 'revolutionary Realpolitik'.

The idea behind 'transitional demands' was to articulate positions that were, on the one hand, demands for specific improvements, for the righting of particularly pressing wrongs – one example would be the struggle for a shorter working day. But, on the other, where the struggle for those (very 'reasonable') demands would acquire a revolutionary momentum, calling into question the very relations of power upholding capitalist class domination, and initiating a process of further radicalisation among the masses. Incidentally, it was with these kinds of ideas in mind that parts of the radical left in the US were active during the time of the New Deal – both within Roosevelt's administration, and among those involved in the upsurge of working-class organisation linked to the emergence of the radical umbrella union, CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). Mostly, they did not labour under the illusion that this was *already* a process of socialist transition, but they did believe that New Deal politics might open a path towards it.

To reject the Green New Deal in its entirety means not learning any of the lessons that we on the left should have learnt by now. It is bad politics, and repeats an unfortunate tendency on the left to disdain mere 'improvements', such as those achieved by what was scathingly called 'trade-unionism', while being entirely out of touch with historical reality.

TM: Of course Frieder is right that it is not enough, particularly amidst the currently acute social and ecological crises, to simply dismiss something because it is 'capitalist', without providing any alternatives. But that is not what the emerging global movement for climate justice is doing. In the mobilisation towards the climate summit in Copenhagen, the network Climate Justice Action has articulated a set of positions that we hope will function much like transitional or directional demands. Examples include: 'leave fossil resources in the ground'; 'recognise and make reparations for ecological debt'; 'strengthen community control over resources and production, be it food or energy'. The demands can be summarised under two broad headings. The first is *climate justice*, by

which we assert that there is no way to solve the biocrisis without a massive redistribution of wealth and power – which in turn implies that the biocrisis can only be solved through collective struggle. The second is, currently for want of a better word, *degrowth*, which refers to the need for collectively planned economic shrinkage.

These are not just demands that are presented to a government or international institution (which is not to say that government action will not play an important role). They are also issues around which multiple movements and positions can coalesce (they can have so-called *compositional* effects). They provide an antagonistic vision that will prevent the immediate cooptation of global movements (as happened in 2005 with the G8 Summit at Gleneagles and the Make Poverty History campaign). And, finally, our struggle over these demands will actually increase our collective power to achieve them.

FW: But calling the transition towards socialism by a different name – whether it is ‘degrowth’ or ‘climate justice’ – does not solve the fundamental problem of the current constellation of social forces. In short, there is no political subject in sight that has any plausible capability of effectively starting a process of socialist transition in any of the relevant countries dominated by the capitalist mode of production.

TM: I agree with your assessment that – with the possible exception of Latin America – left social forces are pretty weak right now. But I don’t understand how, starting from the fact of our weakness, you can arrive at the conclusion that we need to start picking and choosing between the different aspects of different Green New Deals, selectively supporting some and rejecting others. (Given the powerful social forces already arranged in the field, our support might be pretty much irrelevant anyway.) Surely the effectiveness of our opposition will depend on the degree of collective power we can build in the current situation? And building collective power, I would argue, requires the construction of an antagonistic subject, or subjects, which can only be done by marking a clearly oppositional position to the proposals currently on the table.

In this process it is important to remember the lessons of the alter-globalisation movement, where much of the conceptual/ideological inspiration for a global cycle of struggles came from Southern movements, not Northern think tanks. I believe that something similar is happening today. The concept of ‘climate justice’ was coined in the global South and a movement is emerging around this slogan. Currently it is based around a coalition of Southern movements, including the Indigenous Environment Network, and the global small and landless farmers’ movement Via Campesina, alongside Northern autonomous activist groups such as the UK’s Camp for Climate Action, but it’s rapidly growing beyond these constituencies. Or put another way: the global movements, at the end of the cycle of anti-neoliberal struggles, are beginning to coalesce around the problematic of the biocrisis. We don’t yet know where these movements are heading, and what the new cycle of struggles will look like. But although it might take time, this is where I believe the greatest potential for a social and ecological transformation out of the current crises lies, rather than in supporting a Green New Deal that actively aims to restart the madness of capitalist growth.

FW: If I understand you correctly, you seem to be suggesting that the climate crisis, or the ‘biocrisis’, as you call it, is essentially derivative of the generalised crisis of capitalism. But is this really true? Are we ‘just’ confronted with a crisis of capitalism, as you seem to be arguing, or ‘just’ with an ecological crisis, as some in the more mainstream green movement seem to think? I would argue that humanity is in fact facing a *plurality* of synchronous crises that are irreducible to each other. If this is indeed the case, then it would be a grave historical and political error to see the ecological crisis as just a crisis of capitalism, and to focus on fighting the latter while ignoring the specificity of the former.

To clarify: pointing out that the ecological crisis has to be distinguished from the crisis of capital

accumulation is not intended to greenwash capitalism. There are good grounds for affirming, as US-based scientist and activist Joel Kovel does in his recent book of this title, that capitalism is indeed the 'enemy of nature' – *in the last instance*. The question to be answered by concrete analysis, however, is whether there is a really distinctive 'materiality and contradiction' to be found in the present manifestations of a global crisis of the ecology of humankind. In short, does the ecological crisis have a relatively autonomous existence from the ups and downs of capitalism? This global ecological crisis is so significant that some experts see it as ushering in a new geological age, the Anthropocene, where human activity is the single most important cause of global environmental changes. Whereas Tadzio seems to think that it would be madness to support a Green New Deal, it is in fact in his denial that there is a proper logic, for example, of climate change, or of the dramatic decrease of biodiversity, that the madness lies.

Most importantly, the dynamics of the ecological crisis bring about two new aspects that any meaningful contribution to present strategic debates must pay attention to. One, the notion of irreversibility, and – therefore – two, the notion of a specific urgency to be met within a determinate (in fact, rather short) span of time. Climate change – due to the very different temporalities it involves in comparison to the cycles of politics or the cycles of capital accumulation – threatens to create an irreversible situation in which the very basis of human culture will be destroyed. Therefore, any politics of 'the worse, the better' – where the progressive worsening of the situation is seen as the main motive and guarantee for effective revolutionary practice – would be plainly irresponsible, and will be (rightfully) rejected by the multitudes at each level of politics. There is thus no time to be lost in the difficult task of getting the left to accept, by way of strategic political debate, this basic point: If decisive measures are not introduced within something like the next ten years, very little will remain that can be saved at all – which means that providing immediate relief and buying time must be our priorities in the present historical situation.

TM: By focussing on the question of capitalism and capitalist growth, I am not at all denying the fact that the climate crisis – and more generally the biocrisis – has its own internal dynamics that are not reducible to the dynamics of capital accumulation. Obviously, climate change is forcing the radical left to rethink the timeframe of its political practices. Humanity, however much it is exploited, oppressed and trodden upon, has an amazing capacity to (almost) always regenerate itself. Add to that a pinch of Hegelian conceptions of history, and you get a teleology where Communists knew that ultimate victory would be theirs. Once the climate system is pushed beyond its current stable state, however, returning to that state will be impossible – so waiting for some 'victory' in some 'final battle' simply won't do. In short: yes, there is an urgency surrounding ecological crises, and this urgency requires us to rethink some things. But where we disagree is the question of what it is that needs to be rethought.

To start with, invoking urgency is essentially a politically indeterminate move. By this I mean that anyone who invokes urgency generally does so to explain why their particular programme should take precedence over others, over the 'normal' course of things. As a result, calls for 'urgent' action should not be dismissed, but treated with a healthy degree of skepticism.

Next, Frieder is suggesting that by conflating the climate crisis with the crisis of capitalism I am avoiding the complex chain of mediation that stands between the two phenomena. This, he implies, allows me to focus on capitalism at the expense of steps that could realistically, and in 'good time', address the enormity of the climate crisis. However, the fact that, to date, only reductions in economic growth have led to noticeable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions shows that capitalism is the enemy of nature not just in some mythical 'last instance', but each and every day, very immediately. And how complex can the chain of mediation really be if, to take one example, a 40% collapse in the Soviet economy led to a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over the course of the 1990s?

Finally, from a pragmatic perspective, why spend lots of time looking for ways to reduce emissions (witness the amazing attempts to make carbon trading 'work') that are unproven if we already *know* that there is a way? So for me, urgency points towards rejecting a Green New Deal, as it is fundamentally a project for restoring necessarily destructive capitalist growth. On this question, it is the anti-capitalist 'radicals' that have realism on their side, while it is the moderates whose position is mere wishful thinking. In the world of actually-existing green capitalism, what we are likely to get is more carbon trading (which some are already predicting will bring us the next subprime bubble) and more carbon 'offsets', i.e. the ability to pay dodgy companies to generate emissions reductions that allow the North to continue to pollute - a process that has often entailed the destruction of indigenous communities, while having almost no positive environmental impact. To provide 'immediate relief' in terms of the climate means to start leaving fossil fuels in the ground, means starting to move towards a global system of food sovereignty, means breaking intellectual property rights, means transforming the global trade and transport system, means maintaining a zero-growth economy.

FOW: To me, what is really at stake in this debate is expressed in a nutshell by a Chinese saying used by Mao Zedong, 'A voyage of 10,000 miles begins with the first step.' Without the capability of effectively indicating a significant and achievable first step, radical visions remain impractical, nothing more than a pie-in-the-sky ideal sustaining your hopes for a better future. And such visions and hopes far too often provide the basis for a 'revolutionary quietism', which prefers doing nothing (except writing theoretical treatises), in order to avoid getting one's hands dirty in the vicissitudes of actual political practice. Accepting this idea of the first step in no way obliges us to refrain from elaborating our socialist, eco-socialist and eco-feminist visions more concretely. On the contrary, no significant advances ever occur within theoretico-political debates without an underlying urgency. It is precisely now that we find ourselves confronted with the productive challenge of deepening our ecological, feminist, and socialist/communist vision. Only by way of such a deepening will we be able to critically distinguish positive first steps from *false steps*. False steps function to foreclose any further options for more radical change and structural transformation and lead to our losing time in dead ends, like the proposal for reliance on first-generation agrofuels as a way of mitigating the 'energy crisis'. Such fuels actually exacerbate the global food crisis, and their carbon balance is often just as bad, or even worse, than that of fossil fuels. Positive steps, on the other hand, not only make actual improvements and buy more time - they also create openings for deeper changes which will be capable of putting the issues of societal transformation on the historical agenda. An example of this is the proposal for 'greening' the existing stock of houses and dwellings, which both creates (green) jobs and reduces greenhouse gas emissions, while opening a broad range of possibilities for local and co-operative initiatives which will be capable of touching the everyday life of many people.

Therefore, we should not reject the *problematic* underlying present proposals for a Green New Deal, even though we will have to prevent them being functionalised by Green parties as something over which they hold a quasi-monopoly. Instead, we should struggle to make them our own. At this point in time, hijacking the idea of a Green New Deal is our best, and only, shot at putting the world on the path towards an eco-socialist transformation.

New Deal

The name given by US President F.D. Roosevelt to a 1933-1935 package of economic and social policies. They included social security and job creation, as well as massive state investment in infrastructure and the imposition of tight regulations on the banking sector. The Deal, which

afforded workers greater freedom to organise in order to demand and win higher wages, was meant to provide immediate relief to the masses that had been impoverished in the Great Depression, and to begin to pull the country out of the economic slump. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama describes the New Deal as FDR's attempt at 'saving capitalism from itself'. While the programme was later often associated with the ideas of economist John Maynard Keynes, the latter published his programmatic *General Theory* in 1936, some years after the Deal had been initiated. In fact, it was largely as a result of pressure from workers' and other social movements that industrialists and politicians were forced to pass these progressive policies.

Green New Deal

Although the idea emerged in German eco-socialist discussions during the early 1990s, today the term refers mostly to proposals that aim to solve the 'triple crunch' (i.e. the combined economic, energy, and climate crises) by way of a large-scale programme of investment in 'green technology' and 'green jobs'. The political orientations of the proposals vary, from those on the right that see it largely as a possibility to ecologically modernise contemporary capitalism, to those on the left - such as the British Green New Deal Group - who see it as an opportunity to achieve a significant realignment in global power structures and advance a number of progressive agendas. A Green New Deal: Joined-Up Policies to Solve the Triple Crunch is available at www.greennewdealgroup.org

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* From Turbulence 5:

<http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-5/green-new-deal/>

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