

A Green New Deal vs. Revolutionary Ecosocialism

Ecosocialism: reformist or revolutionary, statist or libertarian?

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The idea of a "Green New Deal" has been raised in response to the threat of climate and ecological catastrophe. Two such proposals are analyzed here and counterposed to the program of revolutionary libertarian ecosocialism.

According to the climate scientists, industrial civilization has at most a dozen years until global warming is irreversible. This will cause (and is already causing) extremes of weather, accelerating extermination of species, droughts and floods, loss of useable water, vast storms, rising sea levels which will destroy islands and coastal cities, raging wildfires, loss of crops, and, overall, environmental conditions in which neither humans nor other organisms evolved to exist. The economic, political, and social results will be horrifying.

The scientists write that humans have the technological knowledge to avoid the worst results. But this would take enormous efforts to drastically reduce the output of heat-trapping greenhouse gasses. The recent **UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** writes that this *"would require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban, and infrastructure (including transport and buildings) and industrial systems...unprecedented in terms of scale."* (quoted in Smith 2018) At the least this means a rapid transition to shutting down fossil-fuel producing industries, leaving most oil, coal, and natural gas in the ground and rationing what is currently available. It means replacing them with conservation and renewable energy sources. It means drastic changes in the carbon-based-fuel using industries, from construction to manufacturing. It means providing alternate jobs and services for all those put out of work by these changes.

To the scientists' warnings, there have been rumblings of concern from some financial investors, businesspeople (in non-oil-producing industries), and local politicians. But overall, the response of conventional politicians has been business-as-usual. The main proposals for limiting climate change has been to place some sort of taxes on carbon emissions. From liberals to conservatives, this has been lauded as a "pro-market" reform. But, as Richard Smith (2018) has explained, these are inadequate, and even fraudulent, proposals. *"If the tax is too light, it fails to suppress fossil fuels enough to help the climate. But...no government will set a price high enough to spur truly deep reductions in carbon emissions because they all understand that this would force companies out of business, throw workers out of work, and possibly precipitate recession or worse."*

In the U.S., one of the two major parties outright denies the scientific evidence as a "hoax." As if declaring, "After us, the deluge," its policies have been to increase as much as possible the production of greenhouse-gas emissions and other attacks on the environment. The other party accepts in words the reality of global warming but only advocates inadequate and limited steps to deal with it. It too has promoted increased drilling, fracking, and carbon-fuels burning. These Republicans, Democrats, and their corporate sponsors are **enemies of humanity and nature**, worse than war criminals.

On the Left, there have been serious efforts to take up the scientists' challenge. Various ecosocialists and other radicals have advocated a massive effort to change the path of industrial society. This is sometimes called a **"Green New Deal."** This approach is modeled on the U.S.'s New Deal of F. D. Roosevelt in the Great Depression. Its advocates also usually model their programs on the World War II industrial mobilization which followed the New Deal. (For examples, see Aronoff 2018; Ocasio-Cortez 2018; Rugh 2018; Simpson 2018; Smith 2018; Wikipedia.)

There does need to be a massive social effort to change our current technological course. A drastic transformation of industrial civilization is needed if we are (in Richard Smith's phrase) to *"save the humans,"* as well as our fellow animals and plants. Nothing less than a revolution is needed. Yet I think that there are serious weaknesses in this specific approach, not least in

modeling itself on the New Deal and the World War II mobilization—which were not revolutions, however romanticized. The proponents of a Green New Deal are almost all **reformists**—by which I do not mean advocates of reforms, but those who think that a series of reforms will be enough. They are **state-socialists** who primarily rely on the state to intervene in the economy and even take it over; in practice this program creates not socialism but state capitalism.

From the perspective of **revolutionary anarchist-socialism**, the Green New Deal strategy is problematic because it means (1) an effort to modify existing capitalism, not to fight it with the aim of overthrowing it. (2) As often stated, it requires working through the Democratic Party. (3) It proposes to use the current national state as the instrument of change. Finally (4), while advocates speak of popular mobilization and democratization, their overall approach is top-down centralization.

Plans of Ocasio-Cortez and Richard Smith

A member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was just elected to the House of Representatives as an insurgent Democrat from Queens, NY. With a group of co-thinkers, she has formally proposed that the House set up a special **Select Committee for a Green New Deal**. (Ocasio-Cortez 2018) This Congressional committee would work out a plan for the transition of the U.S. to a “green” non-carbonized economy—although it would not have the power to actually implement any plan. Supposedly this will be raised in the 2019 Congress.

The committee would develop a “*Plan*” to achieve such goals as “*100% national power from renewable sources*” in ten years, a national “smart” energy grid, upgrading residential and industrial buildings for conservation of energy, investments in drawing-down greenhouse gases, and making “green” technology a big U.S. export. Central to its set of goals is “*decarbonizing the manufacturing, agricultural, and other industries.*” “*Decarbonizing, repairing and improving transportation and other infrastructure.*” (Ocasio-Cortez 2018) Supposedly, these goals would be implemented in such a way as to provide good jobs, services, and prosperity for everyone.

Richard Smith is a knowledgeable and insightful ecosocialist writer (from whom I have learned much, despite disagreements). He has a generally positive reaction to this proposal (Smith 2018). Describing himself as “*a proud member*” of the DSA, he approves Ocasio-Cortez’ idea of a massive governmental program, modeled on the New Deal and World War II mobilization, to counter the climate crisis. However, he raises some significant concerns, specially around the key goal of “*decarbonization*”.

“*What’s not said is that decarbonization has to translate into shutdowns and retrenchments of actual companies. How does one decarbonize ExxonMobil or Chevron or Peabody Coal? To decarbonize them is to bankrupt them. Further, the same is true for many downstream industrial consumers....*” What is required, he concludes, is governmental takeover of these industries with the aim of shutting down or drastically modifying them. “*But there is no mention of shutdowns, retrenchments, buyouts, or nationalization.*”

Even more than the need to decarbonize industry (in the U.S. and internationally), is the need to create a balanced, ecologically-sustainable, system of production. “*Perhaps the biggest weakness of the GND Plan is that it’s not based on a fundamental understanding that an infinitely growing economy is no longer possible on a finite planet..., of the imperative need for **economic de-growth***

of many industries or of the need to **abolish** entire unsustainable industries from toxic pesticides to throw-away disposables to arms manufacturers.” (my emphasis)

Unlike his fellow DSA member (and Democratic politician) Ocasio-Cortez, Smith raises a program which explicitly demands government take-overs of the fossil-fuel producing companies. (He notes, “Others have also argued for nationalization to phase-out fossil fuels.”) He also calls for the nationalization of industries which are dependent on fossil fuels: “autos, aviation, petrochemicals, plastics, construction, manufacturing, shipping, tourism, and so on.” These nationalizations would be part of a plan for phasing-out fossil fuels, phasing-in renewable energy, shutting down fossil-fuel production, shutting down or modifying industries which rely on fossil fuels, and creating large government employment programs. This means changing from an economy built on quantitative growth, accumulation, and profits, to one of “degrowth [and] substantial de-industrialization.”

This program may seem revolutionary. “It’s difficult to imagine how this could be done within the framework of any capitalism.... Our climate crisis cries out for something like an immediate transition to ecosocialism.”

Yet Smith contradicts himself; he does not present his perspective as a revolutionary program. While he proposes socialization (in the form of nationalization) of much of the corporate economy, he does not call for taking away the wealth and power of these main sectors of the capitalist class. “We do not call for expropriation. We propose a government buyout at fair value.... The companies might welcome a buyout.” There will be “guaranteed state support for the investors....” Further, “it is perhaps conceivable, taking FDR’s war-emergency industrial reordering as a precedent, that the...plan...for fossil fuels buyout-nationalization...could be enacted within the framework of capitalism, though the result would be a largely state-owned economy. Roosevelt created [a] state-directed capitalism....”

While a revolutionary approach is often derided as absurdly “utopian” and fantastic, this reformist program is itself a fantasy. It imagines that the capitalist class and its bought-and-paid-for politicians—who have resisted for decades any efforts to limit global warming—would not fight tooth-and-claw against this program. They are supposed to accept the loss of their industries, their mansions, their social status, their private jets, their media, their political influence, and the rest of their domination over society—for the sake of the environment! In all probability, to prevent this, they would whip up racism, sexual hysteria, and nationalism, subsidize fascist gangs, urge a military coup, distort or try to shut down elections and outlaw oppositions. All of which has been repeatedly done in the past, and is partially being done right now (if still on a minor scale—so far).

In the (very) unlikely event that the capitalists accepted this program, they would still be left with great wealth from the buyout, which they would use to fight to get back their power. And even in the (extremely unlikely) event that industries could be successfully decarbonized through buyout-nationalization, there would still be the basic problem (as Smith had pointed out) of the essential drive of capitalism to expand and accumulate profits, which must conflict with sustainable life on earth.

There is a whole history of class struggles, of revolutions and counterrevolutions, which have consistently taught the lesson that **there is no peaceful-gradual-electoral “parliamentary road to socialism,”** including to ecosocialism. Radicals should have learned the most recent lesson of the Syriza party in Greece.

Can the State Save Us?

Central to the conception of a Green New Deal is the belief that the state can save the humans and the biosphere. To Smith, “*Saving the world requires the sort of large-scale economic planning that only governments can do.*” There is “*only one proximate solution: state intervention...*” Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez’s proposal states, “*We’re not saying that there isn’t a role for private sector investments; we’re just saying that...the government is best placed to be the prime driver.*”

What Smith, specifically, is proposing is a form of **state capitalism**. He advocates “*a largely state-owned economy*” which may be “*within the framework of capitalism,*” building on but going beyond Roosevelt’s “*state-directed capitalism.*” There is a radical tradition which had also advocated nationalization of big business and creation of public works, but had always tied statification to a demand for workers’ democratic control and management. For example, Trotsky’s **Transitional Program** states, “*Where military industry is ‘nationalized,’...the slogan of workers’ control preserves its full strength. The proletariat has as little confidence in the government of the bourgeoisie as in an individual capitalist.*” (Trotsky 1977; 131) Workers’ management is not part of Smith’s proposal, nor that of Ocasio-Cortez (and it has dropped out of the program of most modern-day Trotskyists).

Of course Richard Smith is a sincere socialist democrat and a long-time opponent of Stalinist totalitarianism. But he calls on this U.S. bourgeois state, the state created and dominated by U.S. capitalism and imperialism, to take over the economy and run it. This program is state capitalism. As a result, the economy, even if decarbonized, will have the capitalist drive to accumulate profits. Just as was the state-capitalist Soviet Union, it will still be inherently destructive of the human-nature ecological balance,.

State-socialists focus on blaming the market economy for social ills, such as global warming. They see the state as an outside, neutral, institution, which might intervene in the economy to solve these problems. “*If capitalists won’t provide the jobs, then it’s the government’s responsibility to do so. We, the voting public, [will] assert our ownership of the government, not the corporations.*” (Smith 2018) In other words, the government **could be** dominated by the corporations (using their money), **or it could be** dominated by the people (using their votes). Supposedly either one is possible, in contradiction to the experience of two centuries of class struggle.

The state is a centralized bureaucratic-military socially-alienated institution. It has been created by (and creates) capitalism (and previous systems of exploitation) and serves to uphold it—and is thoroughly involved in all the evils of industrial capitalism. “*Climate change is another state effect that governments are incapable of solving....The infrastructure of automotive transportation, industrial agriculture, and electricity generation, which are responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, are built and regulated by states (...). The industries responsible for destroying the planet depend on government regulation, police protection, and financing, and form part of an economic complex that is integrally connected to government...Continuing to trust states as the potential solvers of climate change and mass extinction...[is to be] complicit with catastrophe.*” (Gelderloss 2016; 241-2)

Anarchists and radical Marxists have agreed that the existing state cannot be used to consistently defend the interests of workers and oppressed people. At times, under pressure from below, this state may give some benefits. Similarly, the management of a corporation may raise workers’ wages when under the threat of a strike. But neither the state nor corporate management is “on our side.” Certainly revolutionaries may pressure the state to make reforms in the same way as

the workers may strike to force the bosses to raise their wages. But these efforts, win or lose, do not change the institutional power of capital, in corporations or in the state.

Therefore, anarchists and radical Marxists have advocated overturning and dismantling the state and replacing it with alternate institutions. In an introduction to the **Communist Manifesto**, Engels modifies their original views by quoting Marx, writing, “*One thing especially was proved by the [1871 Paris] Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’*” (Marx & Engels 1955; 6) Which is exactly what Ocasio-Cortez, Smith, and others propose to do.

Anarchists and other libertarian socialists advocate replacing the state with federations of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and voluntary associations, defended by an armed people (militia) so long as is necessary. They advocate socialization of the economy, not by state ownership, but by replacing capitalism with networks of democratically self-managed industries, consumer cooperatives, and collectivized municipalities. They expect productive technology to be modified by the workers, in such a way as to eliminate the division between mental and manual labor and in order to create an ecologically sustainable society.

Ocasio-Cortez and other DSAers rely on the Democratic Party to implement their Green New Deal —a plan which, in Smith’s view should lead to the nationalization of much of the economy. However, the Democrats are committed to managing a traditional, private-capitalist, economy. “*Most Democrats...acknowledge global warming is real, yet have failed to take meaningful steps to address the apocalyptic scale of the problem....The Dems have always played seesaw between the interests of their corporate campaign donors and those of the party’s middle- and working-class base... They have more and more aligned themselves with the jealous interests of their elite backers. Party leaders have embraced a business-friendly, neoliberal approach to climate change, just as they have just about everything else.*” (Rugh 2018) For an account of the Democrats’ climate-destroying actions when in office, see Dansereau (2018).

(Members of the Green Party have also advocated a “Green New Deal” for some time. [Wikipedia] I am not reviewing their version of the GND at this time. The Greens reject the Democratic Party, for good reasons, and claim to be for a decentralized society. But they still accept an electoralist-peaceful-reformist strategy. They hope to take over the state by getting their party elected, and then to use the power of the national state to transform capitalism by carrying out a Green New Deal.)

Decentralization and Federalism

Richard Smith is for democracy and democratic planning. He proposes elected “*planning boards at local, regional, national, and international levels.*” Yet his plan, like that of Ocasio-Cortez, is clearly a top-down, centralized approach. Other experts in ecological regeneration (who are not anarchists) have seen things in a more decentralized perspective.

For example, Bill McKibben has long been a leader of the climate justice movement. His main solution to climate change is decentralization: “*more local economies, shorter supply lines, and reduced growth.*” (McKibben 2007; 180) “*...Development...should look to the local far more than to the global. It should concentrate on creating and sustaining strong communities....*” (197) “*...The increased sense of community and heightened skill at democratic decision-making that a more local economy*

implies will not simply increase our levels of satisfaction with our lives, but will also increase our chances of survival....” (231)

Naomi Klein declares, *“There is a clear and essential role for national plans and policies....But...the actual implementation of a great many of these plans [should] be as decentralized as possible. Communities should be given new tools and powers....Worker-run co-ops have the capacity to play a huge role in an industrial transformation.... Neighborhoods [should be] planned democratically by their residents....Farming...can also become an expanded sector of decentralized self-sufficiency and poverty reduction.” (Klein, 2014; 133-134)*

The **(Monthly Review)** Marxist Fred Magdoff (a professor of plant and soil science) wrote, *“Each community and region should strive, within reason, to be as self-sufficient as possible with respect to basic needs such as water, energy, food, and housing. This is not a call for absolute self-sufficiency but rather for an attempt to...lessen the need for long distance transport....Energy...[should be] used near where it was produced.... in smaller farms...to produce high yields per hectare....People will be encouraged to live near where they work....” (Magdoff, 2014; 30–31)* Also, *“Workplaces (including farms) will be controlled and managed by the workers and communities in which they are based.” (29)*

Compare with the views of anarchist and social ecologist Murray Bookchin: *“Civic entities can ‘municipalize’ their industries, utilities, and surrounding land as effectively as any socialist state....A municipally managed enterprise would be a worker-citizen controlled enterprise, meant to serve human and ecological needs....[There would be] the replacement of the nation state by the municipal confederation.” (Bookchin 1986; 160)* The takeover of the oil industry could be a national and international matter, managed through confederation, while use of renewable energy would be primarily implemented by local communes.

In short, the capitalists’ wealth and power should be taken away from them (expropriated) by the self-organization of the working class and its allies. Capitalism should be replaced by a society which is decentralized and cooperative, producing for use rather than profit, democratically self-managed in the workplace and the community, and federated together from the local level to national and international levels. There should be **as much decentralization as is reasonably possible and as little centralization as is absolutely necessary**. There needs to be **overall economic coordination** on a national, continental, and world-wide level, by federations of self-governing industries and communities, but not by bureaucratic-military capitalist states. This is eco-socialism in the form of eco-anarchism.

But Let’s be Realistic....

Endorsers of the Green New Deal see it as a realistic proposal for mobilizing masses of people and changing the ecology. They regard a program of revolutionary libertarian ecosocialism as unrealistic, a nonstarter for the brief time there is left to save the world. We must act quickly, they say, with proposals most people can accept, calling on the state to take over.

This is itself an example of what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realism.” The idea that the Democratic Party would endorse a plan for the next session of Congress to develop a program of remaking U.S. capitalism, perhaps nationalizing much of the economy, and then get it passed through Congress—is, shall we say, not likely. With all due respect to its proponents (with whom

I share values), they are like the drunk who looks for lost keys under the street lamp, because that is where there is light, even though the keys are certain to be elsewhere.

Smith refers to “de-carbonization” as “a self-radicalizing transitional demand”. He hopes that “a vigorous campaign for this Plan will show why capitalism cannot solve the worst crisis it has ever created and encourage demands for...government planning to suppress emissions....With a...monumental mobilization around this Green New Deal ...we can derail the capitalist drive to ecological collapse and build an ecosocialist civilization...”

In other words, he is for building a mass movement for the Green New Deal of Ocasio-Cortez (which he regards as inadequate as proposed), and/or his more radical plan (nationalization based on buying out the capitalists). He hopes that people will become aware of the limits of any pro-capitalism, because the “campaign will show why capitalism cannot solve the crisis.” However, he does not propose to tell the working class and the rest of the population that a pro-capitalist plain “cannot solve the crisis” Instead he advocates a plan which is an expansion of Roosevelt’s “state-directed capitalism.” Apparently he hopes that the people will come to the conclusion that “capitalism cannot solve the crisis” by themselves—or perhaps with some help from the reformist, state-socialist, Democratic Party-supporting, Democratic Socialists of America. An ecosocialist result is far more likely if there are already radicals telling the truth about capitalism, from the very beginning, even if it is, so far, unpopular to do so.

Revolutionaries have long argued that **even reforms are most likely to be won when the rulers fear a militant, aggressive, and revolutionary movement**, or at least a revolutionary wing of a broader movement. “Reforms” in this case would be steps to hold back and mitigate the effects of global warming due to capitalist industry, even by using the capitalist state. Such reforms cannot be won by an environmental movement which tries to be “reasonable” and “respectable”, especially if it has a radical left which offers to buy out big businesses and stay within the framework of capitalism.

We cannot say what is reasonable to expect. **Today’s popular consciousness is not what it will be tomorrow.** The very crises of weather and the environment will change that. The climate crisis will interact with the looming economic crisis, and with continuing turmoil over race, immigration, gender, and sexual orientation. Not to mention endless wars. With such shakeups in the lives of working people and young people, there may be an opening for a revolutionary anarchist ecosocialist program. Whether this will develop in time cannot be known. But we must not give up on history.

In conclusion, **revolutionary libertarian ecosocialists** should support all sincere struggles for reforms, including those advocating state action, and participate in these movements. But they should always point out the limitations and dangers of these programs. they should always raise the goal of a decentralized-federation of self-managed institutions as the only society capable of ecological harmony and freedom.

The issue is not only whether capitalism is compatible with ecological balance and ending climate change. The question is also about the nature of the state, and whether the state is compatible with avoiding ecological catastrophe. These issues should determine our attitude toward proposals for a Green New Deal.

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