



Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, New York: Verso, 2019. ISBN: 9781788738316 (paper); ISBN: 9781788738330 (ebook)

Let us admit up front: we are both excited by the idea of the Green New Deal. We read *A Planet to Win* with a keen curiosity towards a deeper understanding of this phrase, frame and political movement. We write this review with much sympathy but also cautious eyes from deep in the heart of oil country.¹

Aronoff, Battistoni, Cohen and Riofrancos' text is subtitled *Why We Need a Green New Deal*, and yet, the text does not actually emphasize the *motivation* for such an activity. We think this is reasonable and productive: the ecological case for big change is well established. As they argue and we agree: tinkering around the edges remains the prevalent tactic, but even those doing so know it is not enough. Instead, *A Planet to Win* reads closer to a manifesto, a vision of the GND the authors want to see. We mean this as a compliment: such a book is much more in need than another study answering why. Recent polls largely support our point here: a Yale University survey "show[s] overwhelming support for the Green New Deal, with 81% of registered voters [within the US] saying that they either 'strongly support' (40%) or 'somewhat support' (41%) this plan" (Gustafson et al. 2018). Figuring out what it entails and how to make it happen is the appropriate next step.

¹ It may be of interest to the reader to have more detail on our entry points. We are both from and living in the politically conservative southern plains of the United States. Mary's career has been spent in places where "environmentalism", despite extensive effort, remains an elitist term with culturally alienating referents. She has also recently written about the potential for universal basic income to rework "jobs vs environment" (Lawhon and McCreary 2020). Maya's scholarship has focused on sustainability in politically conservative cities. Our thinking on the GND here draws on a recent graduate seminar and we thank our classmates for their contributions to the insights we develop here.

A Planet to Win takes the reader through the ins and outs of a future with a GND. Aronoff et al. emphasize their perspective that an “effective Green New Deal is also a radical Green New Deal” (p.18). They outline systemic changes that are centered upon democracy and public control with an emphasis on a holistic political economy approach. The first chapter, “Bury the Fossils”, tackles the necessity of naming and holding responsible those who have caused the current climate crisis: the fossil fuel industry. It calls for the end of profit-driven energy and for public control over energy as a gateway towards a fossil fuel-free future. A powerful, low-carbon labor movement is the next crucial piece of the GND, elaborated on in the second chapter, “Strike for Sunshine”. The outcomes envisioned include a jobs guarantee from the state, redefining and reducing work, and unionized labor towards the goal of meeting human needs. The third chapter, “Rebuilding the World”, centers on the built environment and the overhaul that the GND will enact, ranging from retrofitting buildings to a nationwide fully integrated electric grid. Housing, mobility and leisure will all reinvented under the GND as the US invests in democracy, decarbonizes, and abolishes inequality. Aronoff et al. move beyond the scope of the US in the fourth chapter, “Recharging Internationalism”, and call for the addressment of Indigenous, environmental, and labor struggles, and the use of supply chains as a means of creating international solidarity. The book ends with the statement that the goal is a “colorful democracy for all” (p.191).

While there is surely more to say about the text and our overall support for the broad vision, here we raise two main issues with *A Planet to Win*. The first may at first seem superficial, but we think is crucial in the US American political context (and has resonance globally). The socio-political-cultural codes throughout Aronoff et al.’s text point us towards what those from the plains might call “coastal liberalism”. However, it is worth repeating, the GND is, at this point, supported across political parties in the US (Gustafson et al. 2018). Our point in drawing attention to these codes is not because the GND is inherently partisan or culturally laden; it is the opposite. To move from idea to implementation, as advocates of the

GND add depth and examples to this idea, we believe it is crucial to continue to frame the GND in ways that resonate across socio-political-cultural lines.

What do we mean by this? We mean, there are many cities that aspire to sustainable policies in middle US America. But the parts of middle US America mentioned in the text are Austin and Madison, two solidly blue,² culturally liberal places. Investment in publicly accessible sports facilities is seen as important, but those named in *A Planet to Win* are soccer and basketball; supporters of these sports have a strong left-leaning tendency. Baseball and American football, which have more politically diverse supporters and draw more from the right, are absent (Hickey 2013). Similarly, the imagined citizens in the book hike and do yoga; they do not hunt or fish. Yet again, these activities are not socio-politically-culturally neutral. Our point is not that every activity needs to be named, but that readers understand these cues. It is not just *what* is absent from this vision: it is *who* is left out of this GND future (see Henderson and Lawhon forthcoming).

In naming these examples, our point is of course not to insist that only conservatives like baseball or get into a debate about the sustainability of fishing. It is to say, quite simply: the GND as an abstract is bipartisan. But if, as advocates add detail to this abstract vision, they drape it with leftist codes, it will cease to have support from citizens who like football, who hunt, who live in cities like Greensburg, Kansas and Georgetown, Texas and aspire to be green on their own terms (see Henderson et al. 2018).

There are also more substantive ellisions that underpin the blue-urban emphasis. Aronoff et al.'s discussion of the housing crisis, for example, focuses mainly on housing struggles in urban areas. They note that housing is a concern in conservative rural areas too, and yet, the crisis here is fundamentally different: the speculation and high land prices that matter so in urban areas are rarely the limiting factor in rural housing. What constrains development in red US

² In the United States, "blue" is often used as shorthand for the political left and supporters of the Democratic Party. "Red" is often used as shorthand for the political right and supporters of the Republican Party.

America is often low incomes and limited job prospects, a lack of rather than excess of investment (White 2015). This is an issue that some smaller, more right-leaning places have aimed to fix through sustainability on their own terms, but Aronoff et al. merely gesture at, rather than engage with, red rural places (see Henderson et al. 2018).

Do such examples *really* matter? No, the type of sport or housing politics are not essential to the GND. Nonetheless, we argue that these choices belie deeper value, discursive and political conflicts embedded in the GND narrative and wider environmental movement.

It is this deeper socio-political-cultural conflict – not pro or anti-environmentalism – that we suggest the US American left, and the environmental movement more broadly, continues to need to grapple with more explicitly (see Lawhon 2013; Martinez-Alier 2003; Rice and Burke 2018). Aronoff et al. tell us that they are tired of middle grounds and working-across-the-aisle politics, and that these tactics should be abandoned. We are sympathetic to this frustration. However, in a democracy, it is not clear how else we imagine the GND garnering the political support necessary for its enactment. The recent presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders is one that will be analyzed through many lenses, but is surely useful here to point out that the groundswell of support for the GND was not enough to carry one of its key advocates into office. How can we mobilize at the national level that Aronoff et al. suggest is necessary if we do not build a coalition that includes supporters and advocates with red state politics? We will fail to build such a coalition if all we know and talk about is progressive blue cities.

Our longstanding work on environmentalism outside the mainstream has made clear to both of us that there *are* versions and visions of a sustainable future that might be achieved through a GND that have bipartisan support. But to be clear, *we would not recommend A Planet to Win to our politically conservative students and colleagues*. The (possibly unintended but non-subtle) cues that the GND is centered around a liberal future to be imposed on those whose cultural referents are deemed politically inappropriate, would, we believe, alienate them from the

wider, more amenable project of the GND. And because we think being mindful of these cultural cues matters, we would hesitate to recommend the book more broadly.

Our concerns with the socio-political-cultural cues throughout the text are related to but not subsumable within our next concern. In *A Planet to Win*, labour organizing is positioned repeatedly as the central tactic through which political action happens; the identities of citizens as workers is enhanced and reinforced. In this sense the text accords with the wider discourse of GND and much of ecosocialism. And yet, as Lawhon and McCreary (2020) have argued in *Antipode*, people's identities as labourers may well be part of the challenge that environmentalists face in our search for a more sustainable future. Reworking, if not fundamentally overturning, the centrality of identities as workers might be better understood as a struggle than a strategy (see also Lawhon et al. 2018).

Huber (2019) has argued that the environmental movement has long been limited by a discourse of "less": we need to consume less, reign in our desires, and live a materially restricted life. What makes the GND and its associated movement compelling is a different narrative: the GND is really about improving quality of life. This point, for us, raises a crucial question: what if, instead of centralizing the GND around labour politics, we centered the movement and its discourse around quality of life? What if we contrasted quality of life in a world with a GND and the world we have? Or the world we will get if we do not radically change our environmental impacts? While Aronoff et al. try to *show* us that this is what the GND does, the ultimate goal of quality of life becomes hidden in their proposed political discourse and organizing tactics.

Central to our concerns here is that a state-planned job guarantee is likely to be incredibly complicated, likely inefficient and expensive, and that decisions about what work matters become state matters. The bureaucratic limitations of the welfare system and the problems associated with replacing welfare with workfare are well established (Funicello 1993; May et al. 2019; Peck 2001). We agree that deciding what work matters is better determined by radical democracy than markets, but also suggest that there may be a better way forward.

The rebuilding associated with the GND will create some jobs. But after this? What then? Aronoff et al. suggest that “crowding out” the factory-farm burger-flipping and H&M clothes-folding is a good thing. But what if, instead of being crowded out, those millions of jobs disappear through automation? The coronavirus shock surely has exacerbated what was already a growing trend (see Stern 2016; Yang 2018). Then we are no longer talking about finding new jobs for the relatively highly-paid, often mechanically-skilled coal and oil workers. We may well be talking about finding new work for a third of the US American workforce, many of whom worked as cashiers or wait-staff. Job creation has long served as political justification for ecologically perverse economic growth; a GND might undermine much of this, but retaining a need to create jobs might not fundamentally redress the longstanding tension between jobs and the environment. Most jobs historically have been resource intensive: at the very least, requiring transit and reducing time for other tasks (see Lawhon and McCreary 2020). While there is more to say here that takes us away from a book review, our key point is: a planned economy at that scale which keeps everyone employed *and* reduces ecological impact is sure to challenge even the most robust imaginaries and organizers.

There is also a longer critique to make – beyond our scope here – about the call to shift much ongoing care work into wage labour. Aronoff et al. appropriately suggest recognition of this work, but, we believe, could learn much from critical scholarship of care-work. Marxian analyses have long sought to ensure payment for care-work undervalued in marketized economies. This has proven a difficult road for various reasons. As has been shown in efforts to formalize work more broadly, bringing such work into the formal economy means establishing rules and regulations, reducing flexibility, re-coding cultural significance and altering motivations for such work. Instead, recent feminist scholarship calls us to refocus away from reifying labour and the relationship between work and income, towards caring relationships and quality of life as central tenets of our social world (Weeks 2011; cf. Green and Lawson 2011; Lawson 2007).

To put it succinctly: is it not, then, better to start with giving people a way to “opt out” of the burger-flipping, the coal jobs, the clothes-folding? A guaranteed income (we advocated for a redistributive universal one or UBI), we suggest, can do so in ways that enable greater autonomy (and is likely less costly than providing unnecessary jobs which a job guarantee is likely to do).

Sure, there will still be work to be done to build this different world, and it will need to be paid, topping up these basic incomes. But a UBI creates the autonomy for individuals to decide whether they want to spend their days caring for children, writing, gardening, or building wind turbines. It also reduces competition and potential for conflict and corruption in the distribution of “good jobs”.

Would there be no willing workers to create this GND world if everyone were provided with a UBI? Quite simply, we think not. We think more jobs would be automated, wages would shift, and more people would work less. But the work that is done, we think, would better resemble where citizens believed their work was useful than it would be if determined by and through a state that was mandated to put everyone to work.

We are, thus, concerned that in GND conversations such as *A Planet to Win* the real goal of quality of life is conflated with, and at times subsumed by, a focus on jobs. We are mindful that a UBI may, at present, be difficult to include in a GND platform and that a job guarantee does currently have more public support. Our point here is not precisely that a UBI must be a component of the GND, but instead that we ought not over-valorize jobs and lose sight of the real goal in our political discourse and practice.

Further, and substantively, we agree with Aronoff et al. that a GND is going to take a lot of time. As the authors well recognize, one of the greatest challenges of radical democracy is that participation is onerous. People already struggle to make time, and the GND will require much more democratic engagement if it is to be localized in the ways described in this text. Aronoff et al. suggest working fewer hours, and we agree that shorter hours with better conditions will mean people have more time and energy to participate. However, again, we suggest that

something like a UBI and flexible work, rather than a jobs guarantee, better enables people to decide how to allocate their time. We suspect, as above, that caring work and democracy will be prioritized, and that a UBI better enables people to reduce work as desired to enable this participation.

In sum, we continue to be excited about the idea of a Green New Deal. We agree that the case has already been made about the scale and significance of change needed. The next steps for those of us who believe in change is to outline what those changes might look like. This part is harder, and is where our differences come out. For all the allusion to local democracy in *A Planet to Win*, our sense is that there remains a need to understand multiple versions of what a GND might look like in places beyond San Francisco and Austin, beyond the soccer fields and yoga studios. The GND will build soccer fields and yoga studios in some places, but we insist on holding open spaces for other visions that accord with different socio-political-cultural codes. For the GND to work, we need to better understand which parts matter and how to speak across difference in ways that hold true to ecological imperatives without alienating our necessary political allies.

Otherwise, we will lose.

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