

**Max Ajl**, *A People's Green New Deal*, London: Pluto Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780745341750 (paper); ISBN: 9780745341743 (cloth)

Let me start this review similarly to my last one on a book about the Green New Deal: I am excited by the idea (Lawhon and Henderson 2020). I, like many readers of *Antipode*, agree that radical change is necessary to build a more just and sustainable future. I no longer live in oil country, but continue to write with attention to environmental narratives and counter-narratives, and to who will like a book for its content, tone and politics. I found much of interest in *A People's Green New Deal*, and read it with curiosity and much sympathy. The text, published two years after the book I reviewed in *Antipode* previously, provides a provocative critique and alternative way of imagining the Green New Deal (GND) to *A Planet to Win* (Aronoff et al. 2019). While Aronoff et al. focus mostly on the United States (although with an eye beyond), Ajl's text is rooted in concerns of and with the global south (although often in reference to northern discourses). In this sense, it directly and indirectly pushes both Aronoff et al. and those supporting and developing a US American GND. Ajl's book, like *A Planet to Win* (Aronoff et al. 2019), is not meant as a holistic text or policy prescription, but instead bears the signature of the author's interests and entry points. Topically, land and climate debt are central to the book, and the author argues that these are essential to, but often overlooked in, wider GND discourse.

*A People's Green New Deal* is divided into two sections. In the first, "Capitalist Green Transitions", Ajl assesses a range of plans to redress environmental problems within a capitalist political economy, raising concerns likely familiar to readers of *Antipode*. This section is useful not so much for advancing new lines of argument as for updating the objects of radical critique. It links to ongoing debates on degrowth and ecosocialist modernism (see Robbins [2020] and various responses<sup>1</sup>), including a quite diplomatic line (particularly in contrast with the tone elsewhere) telling the reader that, rather than degrowth, "I prefer to frame the question a bit differently" (p.58). He suggests, instead, a focus on which sectors

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/political-geography/special-issue/10SV5DM3NW5>

ought to grow and which ought to disappear. Rather than review what is likely familiar terrain, here I focus on Ajl's positive arguments for what a GND of the people would entail. At the end of my review, I consider the politics, narratives and constituencies that might (not) be compelled by such a vision, how this book fits within a wider environmental justice movement, and what, in my view, continues to be missing from our ongoing conversations.

*A People's Green New Deal* outlines a distinct take on the GND in several ways. Ajl's argument is explicitly eco-socialist, and at least at first glance deploys a narrower definition of this term than many others. He notes a concern with overly capacious uses of "socialism", including condemnation of US American discourse which allows "the word socialism to describe anti-racist Green Keynesianism" (p.86). What his narrower definition is, however, is not quite explicit nor it is necessarily orthodox. Private ownership is routinely condemned, and public and worker ownership are supported throughout the text. Yet pages 63 and 64 tell us that "large-scale private property regimes should" be ended (notably, not all), and page 101 describes a motley set of allies and alignments that includes small farmers, red ranchers, and unpaid careworkers. Elsewhere small family (privately owned) farms are described favourably as growing half of the world's food and using agroecological principles. Big Ag is surely problematic, and land *back* and land *redistribution* are identified as key, but the green future that Ajl seems to support appears to be an eclectic vision of small public and private ownership rather than the sort of collectives that defined the socialisms of the Soviet Union or Tanzania.

If, really, a GND is about small farmers being able to own and make a living on their own land, is this not also a rather capacious and unconventional use of the term "socialist"? My point here is not to disagree with Ajl's support for small private, socially and ecologically embedded enterprises; whether drawing on J.K. Gibson-Graham, James C. Scott, Catholic distributionists, or E.O. Wright, many agree that there is much benefit to a mixed economy. It is to highlight that the term "socialist" continues to be used capaciously in ways that seem to increasingly make the term less analytically clear and useful. Further, the term continues to have unclear resonance politically, and I do wonder what productive ends might be imagined

from telling politically conservative farmers that they are “my kind of socialist” or mothers that they really are “workers”?

The answer to what socialism is, and whether it is a useful label for the green vision Ajl describes, is important on several levels. One is that it shapes the veracity of a pivotal claim in *A People's Green New Deal*: that the world “we” want is socialist. There is some ambiguity over which “we” this includes, and no evidence is given to support this statement. That a global majority want sustainability and land redistribution (and redistribution more generally) seems much easier to justify than the assertion that “we”, globally, want socialism. If “socialism” includes small private enterprises (and, plausibly, some private accumulation, commodities and markets), I think much of Ajl’s vision does accord with myriad global political demands. Yet I do wonder what is socialist about this vision, and whether there are more readily legible ways to explain this vision.

The second distinction of *A People's Green New Deal* is more atypical: a clear rejection of modernity, a perspective drawn from southern places and development/postdevelopment literature. Ajl’s opposition to modernity is primarily developed in his discussions of technology. He condemns the “blind faith in technology, a kind of magical catalyst, stardust sprinkled on the current system and capable of transforming it into a just and sustainable world ecology”, which he sees as underlying “opportunist, reformist, and social democratic approaches” (p.9). Ajl’s position is not a rejection of technology, and he describes many technologies as part of his imagined future. It is not entirely clear, however, why certain technologies (computers, industrial modes of transit) are deemed acceptable beyond a sort of pragmatic sense of necessity. Ajl leans on the work of Ivan Illich, which is useful here, yet much has changed in the decades since Illich wrote of conviviality. Given the ongoing importance and divergences within environmentalism over what is and is not pragmatic, necessary, possible and plausible, the work does leave the reader unclear of why certain things might, or might not, be acceptable. The debates between degrowth and ecosocialist modernism resonate again here, and those writing along these lines have also struggled to tightly redress such concerns (see again Robbins 2020 and responses).

The third key distinction in Ajl's argument is a strong push for redressing climate debt as part of a GND, a position that accords with a wider concern with distribution throughout the book. Morally, ethically, it would be hard to deny the validity of claims made here, and these are the grounds on which Ajl makes his case. Yet this is a useful moment in which to more directly engage with the question of politics, narratives and constituencies of the GND. Who, I wonder, is meant to read *A People's Green New Deal*? Much of the tone reads as a message from "the south/margins", to "the north/rich/core", demanding a GND that is more just. This was a gap in the GND literature, and although there are precedents for such work, there continues to be a need for more of such scholarship.

Yet what is to be done with such demands? The realpolitician in me is unsatisfied with claims based on justice and ethics in the world we have today. This is emphatically not because, ethically, I disagree; I agree that there is a need for economic redistribution and that climate debts are real, enormous, and *ought* to be paid. Ajl acknowledges concerns with the practicality of his arguments, and suggests the utility of expanding our thinking about what is possible towards *making* some things possible. Yet without more development along these lines, assertions about what is fair sit awkwardly with political economic insights throughout the text that make it clear the rich/north will take if permitted to do so. Moral arguments do little to sway capitalists to be nicer in a political economic system that enables exploitation, inequality and environmental harm.

Taking this point more generally, then, the latter half of this book may be read as a hopeful vision of the world Ajl and many in and beyond the south would like to see, a vision without a pathway that helps us get from here to there. It is fair to suggest that path-building is the work that others ought to do, although such a point sits awkwardly alongside Ajl's critique that *A Planet to Win* relies on an impractical "electoral route to eco-socialism" (p.90). His argument involves more working *beyond* rather than *through* the state than Aronoff et al. (2019), yet the vast majority of the more than one hundred uses of the word "should" in Ajl's text are followed by actions that would need to be undertaken by some kind of collective

rule-maker. If not through electoral processes, how is such a powerful green socialist entity that guides social and economic practices to come to be?

In this sense, both *A People's Green New Deal* and *A Planet to Win* seem to hope for a radically new world by telling us what the authors want. They largely elide questions of “how” beyond a suggestion that the people already want/can be made to want what the authors describe. My point here is not that radical visions are not useful, nor to ignore that both texts work to expand our visions, and call for the building of movements to support their visions. Yet I do continue to wonder whether it is possible to build a vision that better resonates with, and draws on, the values, morals, politics, vocabularies and livelihoods that so many people already have and aspire to have. Some have suggested that an ecological vision that accords with the views of the global majority is necessarily a vision of “more” (e.g. Huber 2021). Others critique this as incompatible with real sustainability (e.g. Gómez-Baggethun 2020). I am not convinced that “more” is the only way for environmentalists to accord with popular politics, although it is early days for thinking otherwise (e.g. Lawhon et al. 2021). In this sense, one of the most compelling aspects of *A People's Green New Deal* is that it works beyond the more/less conversation, contributing an ecological vision that would be experienced globally by the vast majority of people as *better* (if not more).

In this context, it feels like those of us who believe in the need for a radical programme of political economic change (whether called a GND or not) might still not have created a narrative that is compelling to a global majority, a narrative that includes a pathway forwards. An economy of mixed ownership, redistribution and some regulation might well generate support globally, but labelling this socialist and relying on a big state to create it might not be. In this sense, I read Ajl's text as a useful contribution to ongoing debates, one that makes strong demands and accords with radical positions that can be found across the north and south. I have my doubts as to whether reading *A People's Green New Deal* will convince those not already largely in agreement; this may well not be the author's intent. But I do worry that, as scholars and activists working to build a more just and sustainable world,

we have yet to generate a story of change that is sufficiently clear and capacious, a vision that a global majority might both work to build and find their place within.

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