Green New Deal or Simply Green New Paint? An analysis of H.Res. 109 and its relationship with previous environmental dialogue.

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Abstract:

In order to properly evaluate the claims in favor and against the Green New Deal, I offer analysis in three parts: the effectiveness of the plan to successfully curb the most catastrophic consequences of climate change, the politics of fleshing out and enacting the plan, and the way the plan addresses and interacts with marginalized groups in ways previous environmental literature and movements have not. In short: who is left behind by this plan? The actual text of the current GND proposal in H.Res 109 is light, however it cannot be removed from the wider context and movement it is a part of, including "spin-off" GND's such as Seattle's Green New Deal. While this makes analysis less straightforward, I argue that the plan outlined in the House Resolution still marks a significant turning point in mainstream environmental movements for the better. The intersectional approach it takes illustrates the relationship between climate change, capitalism, and structural inequalities, which has great potential to make a far more comprehensive response to the climate crisis than has been discussed in the mainstream previously.

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Introduction

In the February of 2019, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez put forward House Resolution 109 to Congress, with the catchy title Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal. It successfully passed the house, but quickly failed in the Senate with little time for proper debate. Since then, it's become lauded by many parts of the left, and decried by many parts of the right. But what exactly is the Green New Deal? On the federal level, until three weeks ago, it only existed as a mere 14-page document, which hardly seems enough to reinvent our entire relationship with the environment. The truth is that this non-binding bill is only the beginning of a much wider plan. But this certainly isn't the first plan of its kind. In fact, this isn't even the first "Green New Deal". This road has been tread before, yet still we find ourselves facing an ever increasing threat of climate crisis. How does this plan differ from the previous, and how does it hope to succeed where others have failed? I aim to understand the Green New Deal under three criteria: intersectionality, political and economic feasibility, and scientific ability to curb climate change. To do that, it's important to first understand some of the history.

A Green Fix amidst Red Accounts – Environmentalism and the Financial Crisis

When the Great Recession disrupted the global economy, leaders from across the world turned their efforts towards recovery. The government spending following a recession seemed a better time than any to shift to a greener way of life. In this mindset, American economist Edward B. Barbier was commissioned by the U.N. to write a report he titled A Global Green New Deal: Rethinking the Economic Recovery (2009), which morphed

into an official UN policy later that year. The title is of course a call back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which saw a massive restructuring of the economy and role of government in the U.S. following the Depression. This was not the only green recovery bill written at the time, and even still was not the only "Green New Deal" on the block, but it was one of the largest and most comprehensive plans. Even some of the critical response to the plan seemed to have decent things to say, again at least accepting that it was ahead of other plans of the time. "The Global Green New Deal is certainly more environmentally grounded than the other propositions, and this reflects its international framing, with attention to rural economies and natural habitat in the global South (Salleh 2010, 4)." The first prescribed action on the docket was that high-income countries like the U.S. were to spend 1% of their GDP to reduce carbon dependency (Barbier 2009).

However detailed this global program might be, however, there will always be problems when pursuing a single vision in every single country of the world. Ultimately, as it states in the report title, this is a bill focusing on the economy, and although the Global GND made it a strong priority to create both a greener and more equitable economy, (Barbier 2019), "The one-size-fits-all thinking behind these new deal proposals is worrying, since not all areas of the globe are equally integrated into the capitalist economy, and many peoples are even striving to be free of it (Salleh 2010, 5)." While ambitious, the Global GND can be seen as a relatively minor course adjustment to an otherwise reportedly well piloted capitalist vehicle, where "Social injustice is...cushioned by more just taxation and financial policies (Bauhardt 2014, 5)." Bauhardt continues describing other movements, such as the European Degrowth movement, as "more fundamentally [raising] questions concerning the relationship between material

prosperity and individual and social well-being." Yet even then, neither of these plans could be described as intersectional. Bauhardt points out that neither plan acknowledges the roll of gender in the current economic structure, and I found no mentions of the word "race" in the Global GND either. This plan was titled as a Recovery plan, and while it does attempt to help the poor and promote equality, it is largely unchallenging to the social hierarchies that existed before such a recovery was needed. In that way, the Global Green New Deal is similar to its predecessor. Writes Gilmore (2002), FDR's New Deal was meant "to both restore general health to the economy and to disarm radical alternatives such as communism (18)." She goes on to describe how the program preferred men, white people, and laborers deemed a 'higher status'. While the Global Green New Deal might not explicitly reinforce all these hierarchies in the same way the New Deal did, it still does little to challenge them.

A Collective Pat on the Back - Progress turns to Stagnation

Despite any of these finer social flaws, a 144-page report claiming to contain the key to maintaining economic growth is more than enough to get any neoliberal world leader excited. Initially, the Group of Twenty (G20) leaders seemed to be on board. In their 2009 summit, they "pledged to enhance global climate-change initiatives and negotiations, improve energy security, phase out fossil-fuel subsidies and reduce the economic vulnerability of the world's poor (Barbier 2010, 1)." Barbier notes that despite spending three trillion dollars in economic stimulus packages by 2010, none of the G20 nations save for China and South Korea managed to meet the one percent GDP target they all seemed so enthusiastic about the previous year. For comparison, China and South Korea spent three percent of their GDP (nearly 1/3 and 100 percent of the entirety

of their stimulus spending, respectively), and the United States spent just over one half of one percent of its GDP (roughly 1/12 of its stimulus spending) (ibid.). Moving forward to the present, the problem seems to get more dire by the day, as the deadline to avoid the most catastrophic changes to our planet approaches ever closer.

How the Green New Deal Might Actually Happen

A decade later, and a decade closer to that deadline, how does the updated Green New Deal plan to actually get started on any of the goals governments across the world have been putting off for years? This is where the Green New Deal shows its strength as a part of a larger social movement. Little progress is expected to be made on the federal level for the time being – as the leader of the GND grass roots organizing, the Sunrise Movement, states, they "...don't have illusions of passing this with Donald Trump in the White House (Green New Deal Strategy 2019)." For the foreseeable future, as far as the federal government is concerned, the Green New Deal is just as valuable as the Global Green New Deal was, which is to say, it isn't at all. But this kind of massive change is something that needs to happen on every level: the globe, the nation, the state, and the local. The first two on this list have amounted to little, but efforts in California and in cities across the country might finally make progress in the last two.

Cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle, have moved forward with their own smaller Green New Deals (Secaira 2019). Seattle passed its own non-binding resolution in August of 2019. The repetition of "non-binding" action certainly seemed and seems worrying at first, but perhaps the tides are finally changing. A month later, the very first semblance of definitive action took place – Seattle approved the creation of the Green New Deal Oversight Board (Council Connections 2019). It's still too early to make much

of a judgement call on the effectiveness of this new development. And it's certainly too early to judge anything on the federal level, where the strategy is to simply wait for the 2020 elections, which can go any which way. but current polling puts national support for the Green New Deal at 63% (this statistic is unsurprisingly almost flipped when looking only at Republicans, 67% of which think it's a bad idea) (Marist Poll 2019). Of course, it's difficult to draw definitive conclusions over such a complicated issue from a single *approve or disapprove* polling question, and as more specifics come out, we can expect this number to fluctuate. In any case, the momentum on the local level at least shows promise, and has provided just enough hope to make it a little easier to sleep at night.

New Deal's Resolutions - Goals, Old and New

The Global Green New Deal could ultimately be characterized as attempt to usher in a sort of green industrial revolution, and in a way that tries to prevent some of the inequalities that emerged in the beginning of the historical Industrial Revolution.

To compare to the modern Green New Deal, we must look beyond the formal writing, and into the rhetoric. On the topic of healthcare, for example, Ocasio-Cortez's bill only goes far as to promise "high-quality health care (H.Res. 109, 14)" for all Americans.

Statements from the Representative and her Senate ally Bernie Sanders, however, make larger claims about universal healthcare in the form of Medicaid for All.

Care is a major point where the GND has chance for improvement over previous literature. The care economy – managing the household, childcare, eldercare, healthcare, education – are tasks that often fall to women, either formally (paid) or informally. This

'invisible economy' of social reproduction is largely ignored, both by the industrial Global Green New Deal, which focuses on investments in male-dominated technical fields, and by the other more capitalist-skeptic proposals (Bauhaurdt 2014). Even initiatives such as prioritizing public transit over personal vehicles, Bauhaurdt criticizes, oft ignore the role that many women play in bringing heavy groceries to the home.

The Green New Deal wants to expand what it characterizes as dignified, living wage-paying work beyond the massive industrial capital that the plan requires through its infrastructure upgrades. In a video looking back from a hypothetical future in which the Green New Deal was passed, Representative Ocasio-Cortez tells part of the story of the country's green renewal through a fictional young woman named lleana, who "eventually made her career in raising the next generation in the Universal Childcare Initiative...caring for others is valuable, low carbon work, and we started paying real money to people like teachers, domestic workers, and home health aides (A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez 2019)." This is a marked improvement over the industrial focus of the Global Green New Deal. Although Bauhardt (2014) warns that simply prioritizing the care economy without explicitly challenging its gendered norms only serves to reinforce them, so it's important that as the Green New Deal progresses into further policy, it makes this more clear.

This brings us to the first fully fledged national policy submitted as part of the Green New Deal: The Green New Deal for Public Housing Act (Ocasio-Cortez 2019). The bill awards grants for the expansion and retrofitting of the nation's public housing system, prioritizing not only the national/global pursuit of reducing energy needs and emissions, but also the personal health and economic wellbeing of those who live under it. The

pursuit of energy-efficiency would be a massive economic boon to low-income families, who spend 7% of their income on utilities, or double the national average (Energy Efficiency in Affordable Housing 2018).

This bill also includes workforce development programs for those living in public housing, including training, education, admittance into apprenticeship programs, legal/financial/instructional services to assist small business owners, and stipends of at least \$250 a week for participants in any of these programs.

Malini Ranganathan marks how public housing is an integral part of climate justice that has long gone neglected (Nnamdi 2019). In D.C., the city has put off \$2.5 billion in maintenance costs (ibid.), and in New York City has deferred \$32 billion (Capps 2019).

Previous environmental programs, mostly relating to disaster relief, are frequently defined by the word "resilience". This is often framework that celebrates the fortitude of individuals, while ignoring the racial, economic, environmental injustices that lead to individuals requiring that fortitude in the first place (Ranganathan 2019). This term appears in both the Green New Deal and the housing bill, as well as the media around it. But does the new framework manage to move past the usual shortcomings of the term?

The bill and the webpages on it from Representative Ocasio-Cortez and the Sunrise Movement do not explicitly call out historical discriminatory practices such as redlining that have led to black communities ending up in geographically unsafe and unhealthy areas. While it does aim to protect people from ecological damage, and help them to be better able to protect themselves, the actual need for this protection goes currently unquestioned. The geography of this new public housing is only described as being

"where there is a serious need that the free market cannot address or is not addressing responsibly (Ocasio-Cortez 2019, 9)," but without more details, it's possible that these locations will simply be in cheaper areas – the same cheaper areas that have been exposed to pollution from industry and highways and higher temperatures from heat deserts. However, we can see attention to this broader definition of climate justice in other parts of the movement, for example, in the way its funded.

The Green That's Paying for the Green New Deal – Where's the money coming from?

Perhaps the biggest question, certainly amongst critics, at least, is how this program is to be paid for. The housing bill alone calls for \$180 billion in spending over the next ten years (Capps 2019). Representative Ocasio-Cortez states that much of this would come from repealing the 2017 tax cuts (Nilsen and Irfan 2019), a cut that increased the deficit by roughly \$1.9 trillion over the next decade, according to the Congressional Budget Office estimates (McClelland and Werling 2018). A spokesperson for Representative Ocasio-Cortez stated that, if the US spends as much as it did during World War II (as the name "Green New Deal" implies we should) it would have a budget of \$8 trillion a year (Meyer 2019). Senator Bernie Sander's version of the Green New Deal, the most ambitious plan of any Democratic presidential candidate, calls for \$16 trillion in spending over 15 years (Friedman 2019). So after the repealed tax cut, where will the rest of the funding come from?

Interestingly, no Green New Deal plan makes mention of any sort of carbon pricing, which is a common go-to answer for a new green economy. In California, which has already set its own target of net-zero emissions by 2045, the state has set up the nation's

first cap-and-trade system to fund a variety of programs, which have already reduced current emissions to levels seen in 1990 (Worland 2019). Critics of carbon pricing, however, say that it still allows big polluters to carry on, with a cost, even when it's becoming more and more dire to eliminate emissions quickly. And the slow transition supported by carbon pricing would continue to hurt the low-income communities that polluters often border (Wernick 2019). Here we can see a tension between the economic feasibility of this plan, and the climate justice goals mentioned earlier. In California, a quarter of carbon funds are used specifically to aid disadvantaged communities, to at least try and maintain a more just transition away from fossil fuels.

Where else might the money come from? Senator Sander's plan calls for \$3.1 trillion in "new and unspecified fees (Friedman 2019)" on the fossil fuel industry that are notably not carbon taxes, the elimination of \$15 billion in yearly subsidies, \$1.2 trillion of military spending relating to oil, and \$2.3 trillion in income tax from the new jobs the plan hopes to create (ibid.). That's still shy of the Senator's \$16 trillion. Barbier, of the Global Green New Deal report, cautions that future legislation should not be based on deficit spending, in order to avoid switching out future generations' environmental burdens with economic ones (Barbier 2019).

Representative Ocascio-Cortez disagrees. In an interview, she highlighted an alternative economic model called Modern Money Theory, or MMT, that could fund the program. "A central element of MMT is that governments that control their own currency — like the United States — don't have to worry about spending more than they collect in taxes. They can always create more money (Horsley, 2019)." To someone who's only taken an introduction to economics class, that set off my warning bells. "... When people hear

printing money, they go straight to Zimbabwe or Weimar Germany (ibid.)," said economist Stephanie Kelton, a major proponent of the model. But she and other supporters maintain the idea of a sort is a sort of 'sweet spot' of government printing and spending that can be maintained – one that, yes, involves spending more than is being brought in with taxes, but doesn't cause hyper inflation like in the examples above (Hail 2017). "Runaway prices are only a danger when demand outstrips the real resources in an economy — the people, machines and raw materials. If there's idle capacity, MMT maintains that additional government spending does not trigger inflation (Horsley 2019)."

A survey of several top US economists asking how they felt about MMT revealed zero supporters (Bryan 2019). However, supporters of MMT feel that the statements the economists were asked to respond to unfairly characterize the theory as one that holds deficit irrelevant, while it actually holds deficit as *important but in a different way* than orthodox liberal economics. This model favors 'balancing the economy' rather than the usual balancing the budget, and acknowledges that "All economies, and all governments, face real and ecological limits relating to what can be produced and consumed (Hail 2017)." Critics of MMT have made small concessions to it.

"Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell acknowledged that the U.S. job market has shown more capacity to grow without sparking inflation than he and his colleagues had expected... Persistently low interest rates have also prompted some mainstream economists like Larry Summers and Jason Furman to rethink their attitudes and be less concerned about deficits...(Horsley 2019)."

But these men all make clear they aren't yet convinced by MMT. While it might make sense that a plan that embraces a new type of world and economy might also embrace new models of economic theory, even if the theory ends up ringing true, it certainly leaves a big *maybe* on if the Green New Deal can feasibly garner the support it needs to become law.

The Who's Who of the Green New Deal

Finally, I wish to examine the voices and internal debates of the Green New Deal movement. The "official" movement is outlined by Representative Ocasio-Cortez's spokesperson as having four main components: "The Justice Democrats PAC works on electoral strategy, the Sunrise Movement leads the youth campaign, New Consensus '[creates] some space in the think-tank world,' and Ocasio-Cortez herself works on the inside in Congress (Meyer 2019)." New Consensus is the group aiming to be the "policy quarterback" for the Green New Deal, although it's five members, who founded the group in the fall of 2018, have little direct experience in environmental policy (bidd.). Also worrying is the lack of certain groups at New Consensus's early meetings, including Climate Justice Alliance, a national organization of Indigenous groups, and any and all labor groups. This goes counter to some of the stated goals from Representative Ocasio-Cortez, who wishes to prioritize environmental rejuvenation guided by Indigenous knowledges and carried out by strong labor unions (A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez 2019).

Further controversy surrounds the technology of the Green New Deal. Carbon capture, favored by labor and parts of the scientific community (ibid.) but currently lacking large

scale applications (Jenkins, Luke, and Thernstrom 2018), is left out by the plan, which favors lower tech solutions.

On the topic of nuclear, the Green New Deal leaves it out. The original house bill switched to the intentionally ambiguous phrase "clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources (H.Res. 109, 7)" in its final draft. Representative Ocasio-Cortez wanted to "leave the door open (Toth 2019)" for nuclear energy. She backs the closing of the old Indian Point reactor in New York, but recognizes that "one plant built decades ago is not emblematic of the technology that we have today (ibid.)." The housing bill, on the other hand, explicitly lists renewable energy sources, with nuclear energy missing (Ocasio-Cortez 2019). Senator Sander's plan outright calls for a ban on approving licensing renewals (Friedman 2019).

A letter from 600 environmental groups to Congress echoed the absence of nuclear energy in their version of the green future. The letter cites a UN report on the dangers of climate change, "...but then it ignores the body's finding on how that can be done. The report...says most models that keep the world below that threshold depend on significant increases in nuclear power... (Temple 2019)." I can also say from firsthand experience browsing the web, there are no shortage of science and engineering proponents decrying the lack of nuclear, claiming massive improvements in safety in recent years. It is the first thing to come up in any GND discussion.

Of course, the lack of nuclear can be seen as another attempt to halt the geographic injustices mentioned earlier. In Hanford, Washington, we see the ways in which Indigenous communities struggle to navigate federal cleanup programs (Cram 2015). In

the face of these failures, it is understandable why communities – communities that the Green New Deal specifically tries to bring into the fold – might be cautious of nuclear power, despite claims from any federal officials or passionate Reddit users.

Conclusion

My three criteria for judging the Green New Deal, again, were intersectionality, political and economic feasibility, and scientific ability to curb climate change. The first item is probably the most promising, and clearly marks how the GND is more than just "new paint". Some of the details as I said are still unclear, and there was the worry about the lack of communication with Indigenous groups and others, so the program is still not perfect. If it can manage to overcome these hurdles, then the Green New Deal marks real progress in not just "fixing the environment" in a superficial way, but in the intersectional pursuit of a better, greener future for everyone that's free of some of the inequalities of the past that cause and effect environmental harms. Unfortunately, in its current state, this might come at slight odds with the other two criteria, but the GND still goes far. The sheer amount of money proponents want to use, alone shows the commitment they have to solving this issue, compared to anyone else – like, say, Democratic Presidential Contender Joe Biden with his measly \$1.7 trillion over ten years. It is still unclear how nuclear energy policy will progress in the country, or if it is even necessary at all. Representative Ocasio-Cortez thinks the market wouldn't support it (Toth 2019). It's the political and economic feasibility that brings the most cause for concern though. While the Green New Deal attempts to make great inroads with minority groups that have been previously left behind, the way in which national programs aim to be funded will likely make an already up-hill legislative battle all the

more difficult, regardless of the 2020 elections. But the Green New Deal has left us an incredible framework unlike any other, and the greatest part of these new grassroots networks it's building, is that we don't have to wait for that larger battle to begin our own. We can tackle this issue, piece by piece, right now. It may not be enough, but if that's all we can get, then that is what we must take.

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