

**Max Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal*, London, Pluto Press, 224 pp. – 2021. Paperback: € 19,75 - ISBN 9780745341750**



Max Ajl's *A People's Green New Deal* questions the language, keywords and agendas of Green New Deals (GNDs). Rather than simply offering technical solutions, Ajl argues, they are tools for governing – they are political. Refusing to smother democratic debate about the distribution of wealth under the “blanket of emergency,” Ajl sets out to investigate different GNDs and transition agendas while broaching the vexed question: “are these agendas for governing capitalism, or for destroying it?”

The first part of the book offers a dense critique of several GNDs and projects of “Great Transition” (chapter 1). Following Ajl, “Great Transition” agendas rely on a “Green Social Control” that “aims to preserve the essence of capitalism while shifting to a greener model in order to sidestep the

worst consequences of the climate crisis” (pp. 34). Ajl convincingly reveals how specific plans for “Great Transition” simply create “new kinds of [capitalistic] investment vehicles” grounded on a rhetoric of emergency and a misleading Malthusian model, which pass “vegan diets” and “biofuels” off as possible green solutions.

According to Ajl, this is also due to a “technological genie” that produces an unwavering faith in technology (chapter 2). Focusing on the history and theory of “eco-modernism,” Ajl notes how faith in technology reduces central political questions to issues of technological advance. This faith is grounded in two underlying assumptions: “capitalism is not inherently polarizing and exclusionary” and “technologies are socially innocent” (pp. 72). With a focus on dependency theory, Ajl challenges these premises showing the obstacles within capitalism to a possible decoupling of growth from environmental impact. Along these lines, Ajl then addresses the unavoidable question of energy use (chapter 3). Instead of Keynesian progressive GNDs or “strawman degrowth” models, Ajl proposes a model of “energy use” that, while calling for a reduction of energy use in the North, would by no means prescribe austerity.

A focus on inequalities between North and South is also what allows Ajl to argue that the Alexandra Ocasio Cortez 2019 Green New Deal (AOC-GND) “displaced and erased” demands and necessities coming from the Global South (chapter 4). Ajl reads this

GND model in continuity with 20th century social democracy and what Ajl sees as its distinctive traits: “class compromise,” “constant growth,” “value extraction from the periphery” and “anti-communism:” flaws that lead green social democracy to “ecological imperialism and environmentally uneven exchange.” Ajl continues by listing what he sees as four major shortcomings to green social democracy projects, even those to the left of AOC's GND: they are not “achievable through current strategies,” they are “imperialist,” “marketed as eco-socialism” even though they are not, and limit “our political imaginations.”

Part two's four chapters expand on these claims and complement the book with an imaginative, yet solution-based roadmap to eco-socialism – or, “a set of analytical notes” to a People's Green New Deal. The main premises for this are that eco-socialist “civilization” cannot rely on the voting system of social democracy in the “short-to-medium term, and in the North” and that socialist “utopia” must overcome the anti-rural prejudices of Western Marxism and its Eurocentric gaze. If social democratic green programmes preserve capital, a People's Green New Deal, on the contrary, “is about building eco-socialism.” Ajl thus delineates some radical changes needed to “build autonomy and decentralized power in the transition” in key sectors such as labour, industrialization, agriculture, transport, architecture and urban planning (chapter 5): controlling rather than dismantling industry; Ivan Illich's technol-

ogies of conviviality rather than productivity; planned longevity rather than obsolescence. The following chapter delves into the advantages of planning a socialist agriculture that “soak[s] the countryside in culture,” through land restorations, agroecology, and pasturing. Ajl stresses the importance of an eco-socialist agriculture that ousts the most basic element in production – land – as grounds for jettisoning the structures of major monopolies, the imperial and racial division of labour, as well as the production of waste inherent to industrial agriculture. Food and seed sovereignty in the periphery, according to Ajl, are fundamental tenets of this agricultural anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist structural change which benefit both “the South” and “the North”. This cannot be achieved without economic and political self-determination – specifically, the respect of state-sovereignty (chapter 7). Following the internationalism of Third World Marxism, Ajl claims that national sovereignty in the South through decolonization and demilitarization must be achieved immediately, above all to allow for climate and ecological debt reparations. In closing, Ajl renews the stakes of an anti-capitalist planetary People’s Green New Deal to critique the Left in the West of having abandoned the rubric of anti-imperialism and internationalism, failing to “forge the necessary alliances and social bases for a mass-based internationalist project of permanent social change” (pp. 204).

Ajl admirably highlights the fact that GNDs, while appearing as depoliticised governance tools, hide precise political agendas. Implicit to his claims is how a particular use of language in GNDs preserves capitalistic modes of production by suffocating democratic debate and allowing for the perpetuation of its exclusionary political mechanisms. Crucially for architecture, these hidden political agendas of GNDs pass planning and construction off as mere tools for technological solutionism in the context of environmental urgency. Yet, if such a political critique of GNDs is timely and laudable, some of the claims Ajl puts forward in his eco-socialist project deserve further unpacking. Although the State has already shown its deficiencies in attending to a project of revolution, Ajl’s eco-socialism insistently harks back to a revolutionary horizon that preserves state-sovereignty. Ajl assumes the unity of state-sovereignty in contemporary capitalism and glosses over how it might be disentangled from its role as a regulator of capital and war (a role underlined by authors as diverse as Bob Jessop and Maurizio Lazzarato) or, it could be added, from the very power and violence which Saul Newman, among others, maintains undergird it. Given this ambiguity one might ask: is reaffirming a predilection for state-sovereign politics not at odds with an actually demilitarised and decolonial anti-capitalist project? This understanding of sovereignty is tied to a form of traditional

Marxism primarily focused on class relations of domination. What seems at stake in Ajl’s project is the ownership of the means of production that, from the individualized ownership of the “ruling class”, must pass into the hands of a universalized “people of the planet” (Ajl, pp. 46). Yet, this humanistic reading of Marxian theory – which, as Moishe Postone observed, does not address the system of abstract domination structuring capital beyond individual will – risks reproducing the shortcomings of twentieth century socialism. In this context, doesn’t a humanist critique run the risk of leaving unaddressed crucial mechanisms of capital that might get in the way of an anti-capitalist, green project? Overall, while exposing the un-said and its political implications in several GNDs, Ajl seems to leave unattended the un-said of his own central concepts – one might dare to say the keywords – sovereignty and people.

Igor Fardin, Richard Lee Peragine  
Politecnico di Torino