

Routledge Handbook on the Green New Deal

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Foreword

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FOREWORD

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Is Mother Nature an accelerationist? One could be forgiven for thinking so.

Privileged populations in the global north are increasingly getting hammered by natural disasters, turbo-charged by climate change. In other words, what vulnerable communities everywhere have been experiencing for decades. Climate breakdown is indeed accelerating, and the existential threat is finally impossible to ignore in the halls of power.

This makes the debate about the Green New Deal (GND) – the big idea at the centre of this Handbook – a hugely consequential one, taking place at an inflection point in human history.

While this volume contains many useful definitions, the GND is at its core not a proposal, but a frame. A contested, evolving, and necessary space in which it is possible to consider solutions that embody the speed and scale necessary to meet the overlapping emergencies confronting all living things.

Because, of course, the climate emergency is not the only one we face on planet earth. There are other environmental crises, from mass extinction to biodiversity collapse to rapid deforestation. There are social crises, from housing bubbles to surging white supremacy, and public services shredded by decades of austerity, buckling under an immense burden of need. There are economic crises like spiralling inequality, concentration of wealth, and discounted women's labour. There are international crises of ever-increasing militarism, twenty-first-century colonialism, and the negative net transfer of wealth – the fact that the poorest countries on earth still pay the richest ones hundreds of billions of dollars a year for the privilege of staying poor.

And now there is the COVID-19 pandemic, which both exacerbates and is exacerbated by many of the emergencies above.

The links of causation and amplification among all these intersecting disasters would take another book of this same impressive heft just to list. But in preface to a volume on the GND, it's worth noting at the outset that none of them can be solved in isolation. That's why this big idea has become so important to so many. The GND attempts to articulate a vision of transformative, holistic change in the face of cascading, connected emergencies. And it attempts to ground this vision in principles of justice, resting on a foundation of scientific necessity.

Transformation in the face of climate breakdown has long been the demand of Indigenous leaders, social movements and frontline communities. But those calls are now footnoted with empirical science – especially, and explicitly, since October 8, 2018.

That's the day the press release dropped for the Summary for Policymakers of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (approved by governments.) Here's the first sentence, which as far as I'm concerned, says it all:

Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society, the IPCC said in a new assessment.

It is a baldly revolutionary sentiment. “Unprecedented changes in all aspects of society”! It’s practically T-shirt-worthy (ok, for a very small subculture, but who wants a T-shirt that everyone is wearing?) The fact that it is found in a marketing document for the specific form of IPCC report that is subject to the compromises of political negotiation, is remarkable.

It’s also an incredibly succinct expression of the scientific imperative for a Green New Deal.

I have found myself repeating these words, mantra-like. Meditating on them, making them the screensaver on my computer. I find that they magnify both the challenge and the opportunity of transformative climate action that addresses the very system which created the emergency. “Rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes....” It is both thrilling and terrifying. And it is also a relief: it acknowledges the scale of the problem, and provides a diagnosis that is commensurate.

These are words that just keep giving. “*Every aspect of society.*” As a mid-career filmmaker and climate activist who has suddenly become an academic, I have only recently given any thought to the role of the university in the existential struggle for climate justice. It has been an unwelcome revelation for me, though I’m sure this has long been obvious to many readers: the academy itself requires “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes” if it is to play an effective role in a society-wide mobilization around the climate emergency.

This book – the sheer expanse of it, both materially and intellectually – gives me hope that this change is beginning. It represents an explosion of work on the GND that is truly heartening to see. The span of voices from diverse disciplines, geographies, and ideologies is impressive. But what is also notable is the spirit of this collection. Even the most profound challenges to the very frame of the GND seem carefully designed to be constructive, respectful, generative.

As you read the many chapters of this book, you will encounter a far-flung community of scholars who may have important disagreements, but nonetheless treat this political moment as both consequential and precarious. The authors manifest a clear intention to move the GND forward in full awareness that the lives, health, and well-being of hundreds of millions of people are on the line, hanging in the balance of what kind of change we can win in the next short few years.

It has to be said that the political conditions are not yet ripe for the full implementation of a Green New Deal. There has been much excitement since 2018 that in the heart of global empire, insurgent young US politicians might not just crack the Overton window open, but knock it off its hinges. But that has not come to pass. It is true that GND-scale policies have finally been floated (and diluted) in the US Congress. But by and large, the fossil-fuelled forces of late-stage capitalism have once again proven that they are able to absorb and deflect movements that would shift the balance of forces in society toward climate justice.

And so we have entered a new era, which I have taken to calling The Co-optocene. It’s a time when the titans of the global economy try to sound like Greta, while overseeing trillions of new investments in fossil fuel projects. A time when Canada’s government trumpets

its climate leadership even as it rams a bitumen pipeline through Indigenous territory, stuffed full of billions in fossil fuel subsidies.

This is the moment of double discourse that has arisen in tandem with – or perhaps in response to – the spectre of the Green New Deal. So as the floodwaters of climate anxiety rise around us, they are sand-bagged with vigorous greenwashing in the form of “Net-Zero by 2050” pledges from governments, corporations, and large financial institutions. These schemes are designed to assuage very real fears, but they do not stand up to any rigorous accounting. In fact, almost without exception, the impact of these plans will be to perpetuate the very status quo that is choking the planet. Taken together, they are a festival of false solutions, festooned with unproven technologies, borne on the wings of magical thinking.

And yet.

Nearly two decades ago, Naomi Klein unearthed an overlooked passage from Milton Friedman – one of the principal architects of the neoliberal order which has immeasurably accelerated the climate crisis. Those words have resonated far and wide, and they remain a powerful premise for work on the Green New Deal:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

The ideas lying around in these pages need to be ready to get up and leap into action. They need to be ready for prime time, whenever it arrives. And since we don’t know when we’ll reach that political tipping point, the work of debating, deepening, and defining the Green New Deal is a matter of true existential urgency. This book may be a little supersized. But so is its contribution to the most important work in the world.