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The Green New Deal: A Bitter Victory or a Sweet Defeat?

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The developments of recent years, from EU climate policies to Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act, bear witness to the influence of the Green New Deal agenda, even if many of its original proposals have been watered down. Now, as climate action gets caught up in the struggle for geopolitical supremacy and threatened by the MAGA counter-revolution, can greens and progressives regain the initiative?

In the first few days of his second administration, US President Donald Trump explicitly ordered an end to the Green New Deal. The slogan, which had been at the centre of progressive and environmentalist politics for the past five years, has been denigrated as “ridiculous” and “wasteful”. Viewed through the climate denial lens of the new US government, the Green New Deal has become the symbol of all that it seeks to dismantle.

The paradox, as Frida Garza and Kate Yode argued, is that Trump’s war on the Green New Deal is fought against an enemy that does not exist. The Biden administration did not pass any Green New Deal legislation, although it did develop the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), an ambitious package of measures inspired by Green New Deal proposals, supported and campaigned for by US climate movements, and championed by the left wing of the Democratic Party. The IRA is what Trump’s executive order actually suspended.

While it was undoubtedly the most far-reaching package introduced by the Biden administration, the IRA was a far cry from the original programme of the Green New Deal, when its moniker became fashionable at the end of 2018. Over the course of 2023 and 2024, environmentalists seeking radical change became more ambivalent towards the Green New Deal. While it brought historic breakthroughs, it also had its limitations.

This process might be described by Gramsci as a “passive revolution”, in which only time can dictate whether we in the environmental movement lost by winning or won by losing. Many of our demands and arguments were taken on board by Western governments and their legislative agendas. Some governments were already pushing through tangible changes with few precedents. However, this was at the cost of lowering the original ambition and softening the more transformative edges of the project.

In the shadow of Trump’s MAGA movement, the Green New Deal can probably be seen more as a positive defeat than as a flawed victory. Defeat is still positive, because it is not without the capacity for reaction. The very fact that Trump has declared war on what was but a rehearsal of what the Green New Deal could become is proof of the political potency of the idea. Moreover, some key proposals of the Green New Deal persist in the new race for industrial competitiveness between trading blocs, such as the importance that the “Draghi report” attaches to the overall electrification of Europe.

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In short, the European political class needs to incorporate elements of the Green New Deal to continue to stay in power. This offers the opportunity for environmentalism and the left to tilt the process towards a just and ambitious transition.

What we do not know is whether the original signifier of the Green New Deal can survive the new world in which it finds itself. Perhaps the environmentalism of the second half of the 2020s needs to find a new formula to unify its collective enthusiasm, and even a new name to summon forces for the political battle to come. In terms of the message, we may be at a turning point, but the general strategic direction that the Green New Deal pointed towards is still the right one: a combination of environmentalism, prosperity, and redistribution through a return of the state to make the ecological transition rapid, just, and desirable.

In terms of our programme and our ideas, the current impasse is a political turning point. It forces us to make tactical adjustments to update the spirit of the Green New Deal for much more hostile times.

Post-neoliberalism with climate at its heart

According to Thomas Meaney, in rhetorical terms, the story of the Green New Deal is one of genuine success. Less than fifteen years after the popularisation of the concept in some British and American opinion columns and think tankreports, the entirety of Western left public opinion has embraced it.

In its essence, the Green New Deal is an umbrella that brings together various political themes, led by a strong state interested in economic intervention to accelerate the transition to a decarbonised society with social justice at its heart. In other words, the greening of the economy should at all times be accompanied by a process of wealth redistribution, which would make it possible to overcome the most harmful social effects of the neoliberal era.

The Green New Deal was fed intellectually by an environmentalism revitalised by growing climate impacts, the shock after Trump’s first term in office, and a political current critical of neoliberal globalisation and advocating the role of the state in economic development and industrial policy, among others. This economic theory, born of neo-Keynesianism, which attempted to respond to the banking crisis of 2008, joined the youth climate protests of 2019 (which found their expression in the excellent result of the Greens in the European Parliament elections that year) and growing scientific alarm at the worsening of the climate crisis, as well as the revolution in renewable technology after the Paris Agreement, to form the Green New Deal.

Since then, the Green New Deal has been a contested idea from different ideological perspectives, from a liberal centrism sensitive to climate impacts, to pragmatic eco-socialism, to anti-capitalism.

The Green New Deal in Spain

The idea of an ecological transition with social justice at its heart was not new in Spain, where similar proposals existed from the 1990s onwards, both in environmentalism and post-communism and in the first “100% renewables” reports by Greenpeace. Even the left-wing political party Podemos presented a massive plan for investment in renewable energies in 2015, designed by American economist Robert Pollin, one of the ideological drivers of the Green New Deal. But if the brief history of the Green New Deal in Spain shows anything, it is that for an idea to be politically successful, it must not only be attractive but also have “a moment”. This propitious moment came in the run-up to the green wave in 2019.

It was PSOE, the traditional centre-left party in Spain, that had a better understanding of the green wave to come. In June 2018, after coming to power in the first successful censure motion in the country’s history, Pedro Sánchez appointed Teresa Ribera as Minister for Ecological Transition. This new ministerial appointment was much more than a change of name, as the former Ministry for the Environment now had control of areas like energy. At this time, activists from the Contra el diluvio (“Against the flood”) collective introduced the Green New Deal proposal into Spanish environmental movements, which were strongly marked by a libertarian tradition, with little or no interest in wielding power, anti-consumerist ideas, and a strong distrust of renewable energies.

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A year later, the PSOE included a Green New Deal in its manifesto, albeit not at its centre. Meanwhile, to the left of the PSOE, the idea of putting together a Spanish Green New Deal influenced the formation of two new spaces: Más Madrid, which had a notable regional presence and led the left-wing opposition in Madrid, and Más País. The latter would run in alliance with the Green party Equo in the elections, making the Green New Deal just transition the backbone of its political programme.

2019-2022: Popularising the Green New Deal

While we can take no credit for its rise, as the mass climate mobilisation played the central role and we were only a small part of it, the idea of an energy transition became the defining political ground in 2019. In Spain, administrations of all kinds declared a climate emergency: from city councils as important as Barcelona’s to the Spanish government, whose Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge did so in 2020.

However, the great innovation of the Green New Deal in 2019 was the way it inspired the main thrust of the European Union’s thirty-year economic and technological development strategy, which took shape in the adoption of the European Green Deal. This was reinforced by a series of political turning points, some desired and others in the form of unforeseen shocks, including the Covid-19 pandemic, newfound Chinese impetus on the climate, the end of climate denialism represented by the Trump administration, and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Although the pandemic brought the climate protests of the previous year to a screeching halt when it was on an upward curve rarely seen in the history of social movements, it also cemented the theoretical ruin of neoliberalism. It tested the fragility of our economies and health systems after four decades of offshoring and a decade of sociopathic austerity. The result of all this was that the return of the state (both at the national and EU level, the EU being an institution with a tendency towards statehood) was moving from theory to implementation. And it did so by directing huge volumes of European investment towards the ecological transition, as was the case with the NextGenerationEU funds.

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In September of the same year, to everyone's surprise, Xi Jinping announced at the UN General Assembly the goal of Chinese carbon neutrality by 2060 and of peaking emissions by 2030 – an insufficient but incredibly important commitment to ensure a climate-safe future for humanity. As it turned out, the announcement was far from a rhetorical gimmick: by 2022, China was already investing 70 per cent more in its energy transition than the EU and the US *combined*, despite having a GDP comparable to each of them separately.

Biden's victory over Trump in late 2020 marked the end of the first explicitly denialist administration in US history. With its successes and failures – and its climate failures did exist, such as the opening of oil wells in Alaska, or new gas pipeline concessions – so-called Bidenomics was undoubtedly influenced in many respects by the economic agenda of the Green New Deal that the Democratic left of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders had brought to the fore in previous years. Anyone who has followed American politics cannot miss the common thread that links Bernie Sanders' Green New Deal, Biden's Build Back Better proposal, and the Inflation Reduction Act finally passed by Congress in the summer of 2022. Although far from Sanders' ideas, the IRA was the most ambitious green industrial policy tool in US history.

Finally, the violation of the international order that was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 taught Europeans, still heavily dependent on Russian gas, that decarbonisation was no longer just a matter of environmental or economic necessity, but also an existential security imperative.

Social democracy in wartime

Russia's war on Ukraine threw environmentalism and the Left back into a historical pattern that is very difficult for our democratic, pacifist, and multilateralist political traditions to accept: the most powerful motivation for industrial activity and coordination, historically speaking, has always been a military one. World War I did more to show the effectiveness of economic planning than decades of theorising. World War II did more to end economic crisis and stagnation in the United States than years of the New Deal had. There is nothing like a war to discipline a sufficient critical mass of economic interests and convince them, by hook or by crook, to cooperate in the pursuit of certain state-set objectives.

National security and geopolitical supremacy are the *ultima ratio* available to nation-states, their last ace in the hole to overcome self-imposed constraints in the form of institutional designs and international agreements that prioritise the interests of so-called markets and the accumulation, flow, and profitability of capital. The invasion of Ukraine transformed timid post-neoliberal steps that reacted to climate change and the pandemic into a kind of *wartime social democracy* in which geopolitical conflict underpinned a drive for national or EU reindustrialisation, energy independence, and fiscal redistribution.

While the advances of the Green New Deal project were worth celebrating, the overall context of progression towards militarism and geopolitical conflict was not. That is why we speak of a flawed victory or a positive defeat. The essential question posed by the co-opting of the Green New Deal is therefore particularly perverse: the high point of the project coincides with the exhaustion of the social forces driving it, and its transformation (run down and distorted) into a programme of modernisation of capital and *raison d'état*.

The dilemma for the Left and environmental movements at these crossroads, therefore, lies in deciding whether their stance should be that of a precarious "in and against", to enhance the elements of social justice and climate stabilisation and neutralise the worst bellicose and securitarian impulses, or whether on the contrary the inevitable drift of the project is already one of military confrontation, which must be critiqued sharply from the "outside". Neither of these two options is easy or costless, because the dangers of military confrontation are as real as those of the climate crisis.

Is the Green New Deal irreversible?

In an essay from almost two years ago, we closed by questioning the relative irreversibility of the Green New Deal and identifying five challenges for its future success:

The first was technical, and had to do with solving problems of energy storage, industrial electrification, and circular use of materials.

The second was ideological: integrating eco-socialist criticisms into the discourse and avoiding a transition focused on growth.

The third challenge was institutional, and was aboutrebuilding state planning and management capabilities after decades of outsourcing and austerity.

Then there was the discursive challenge of framing the ecological transition as a source of security in the face of climate change and social crisis, but also as a positive destination, to counter the passion driving the far right.

Finally, there was the political challenge of fostering public majorities in favour of the Green New Deal, despite societal climate fatigue and local resistance in the anti-renewable movement.

Two years later, it seems that the greatest of these challenges is still the political one. Paradoxically, the relative irreversibility of aspects of the Green New Deal, such as the decarbonisation of the electricity mix, seems much more assured by cheapening renewables, and their spectacular technological development, than by our ability to defend the programme. Curiously, as environmentalists who have always emphasised the political rather than technical nature of the ecological transition, we have been more reassured by certain market achievements, technological development, or China's climate commitments, than by our own political strength, where we have been more modest than we should be.

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Regaining the initiative, learning to play the political game imposed by the rise of the far right, and unleashing climate counter-revolution across the West are our most immediate tasks. In this context, perhaps the term "Green New Deal" needs to be renewed. Or perhaps it does not. But its fundamental idea remains valid.

Spain is a case in point. It is no coincidence that the only European country where the Left governs has strong economic growth underpinned by a rapid deployment of renewables, and a reduction in inequality thanks to an increase in the minimum wage and the first progressive labour reform in forty years. It is also no coincidence that Teresa Ribera is First Vice-President of the European Commission.

We know that economic growth is a structurally problematic model, which we must overcome with a post-growth vision. We know that Spain continues to suffer from social injustices, such as the housing crisis. But we suspect that, if in the midst of the reactionary tsunami sweeping the West, Spain is a kind of oasis, it is because it has found a formula that closely resembles the one the Green New Deal always sought. And if that formula is still fragile, it is because it has been applied too softly.

This text is the revised and condensed version of a long analysis of the history and future of the Green New Deal and what it means for environmentalism. The original essay, "¿Amarga victoria o dulce derrota?" *was written at the end of 2023 and first published in the book* Green New Deal ¿Un programa ecosocial para Chile?*. An updated version of that text was published one year later in the journal* Corriente Cálida*. The underlying assumption of the original piece is still valid. However, its emphasis might need to be rethought in light of Trump's climate counter-revolution.*

Translated by Albie Mills | Voxeurop

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