

CLIMATE CRISIS

Interview: The politics of climate crisis

Alyssa Battistoni interviewed by George Morris

A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal (Verso, 2019) seeks to reframe left politics for an age of climate crisis. *Renewal* spoke to one of the book's co-authors about the political project of the Green New Deal.

George Morris (GM): We were meant to be doing this in person, but instead we're doing it over the now ubiquitous Zoom; so let's start with the coronavirus. In *A Planet to Win* you talk about the crises on the horizon and the way in which ecological and economic crises combine and mutually reinforce.¹ Disease is a perfect example. Do you think that people will read the crisis in that way, as a sign of things to come, and take the climate crisis more seriously as a result?

Alyssa Battistoni (AB): I certainly hope so. I think there are two questions. The first is whether people will read the current moment as indicative of the kind of concatenating crises that we're likely to see as climate change and its effects become more severe. It's important that people recognise this kind of emergent disease is something we're likely to see more of.

The second question – which I'm much more worried about – is: if we recognise that these sorts of crises are likely to become more common, can we do anything about it? There's been a lot of discussion about whether this is a moment where we could have a Green Stimulus and a rethinking of our relationship to nature; I think this is a moment when people are really looking hard at the political-economic system and the potential to change it. But how do we do that? We published an

excerpt from *A Planet to Win* in *Jacobin* a week or so before the first major stimulus bill passed in the US, arguing that the moment of crisis was also an opportunity to spend money in a way that would start the process of decarbonisation, and looking to the Obama administration's response to the 2008 financial crash as an example of a missed opportunity.² But the \$2 trillion stimulus package that passed was definitely not a green stimulus. It included bailouts for airlines, for example, without imposing conditions on that around carbon reductions, or insisting on government equity, which would make it possible to make demands on airlines down the road.

The stimulus did prove that we can come up with unprecedented sums of money when we recognise that there's a crisis. But the people who recognise that this moment is indicative of broader ecological crises, and who see this moment as a chance to begin spending money in a way that decarbonizes the economy, just don't have power. The biggest challenge will be translating that awareness and those ideas into action.

GM: The Green Stimulus plan that's been published is fantastically detailed.³ But as you say, actually translating that into power is impossible under the present circumstances. So what is the purpose of it as an intervention?

AB: It's important to show that our ideas are possible. The Green Stimulus proposal was published before the actual stimulus package. The plan called for spending \$2 trillion dollars as a starting point, which people would have said is crazy, but now the US has actually passed a \$2 trillion-dollar stimulus. Clearly, we have that money.

In moments when it's clear we can spend that kind of money, it's also important to demonstrate that there's a way that we could spend that \$2 trillion dollars that would start to undertake some of the things that we know we need to do to decarbonise and mitigate the effects of climate change. It's important to start to circulate our plans and get movements to talk about them, to advocate for them, to get people who are in positions of power to engage with them. The Green Stimulus plan is an amazing package of everything we want to see, and I don't think anyone imagines that we're going to get all of that all at once under *any* circumstances. But starting that conversation is really important. As you note, it's unlikely under a Trump administration that we're going to get any of it, but we can start to push people on trying to include *some* of it in future iterations. There's been a lot of talk about an infrastructure spending bill since the first stimulus bill passed; if we could get at least some green infrastructure in that, that would be better than nothing.

But again, it's not for lack of ideas that we aren't tackling the climate crisis. We need to think hard about how we can change political and social dynamics to get some of these great ideas implemented.

Reframing politics

GM: The new climate politics is really good at putting forward concrete demands. As Ann Pettifor points out, the Green New Deal has formed a concrete centre around which a previously disparate green movement has coalesced.⁴ Do you have a sense of why there's been that shift?

AB: It's been really important to have a positive vision around climate change, to offer something to fight for, rather than the politics of climate being a politics of apocalypse or catastrophe. It's very hard to mobilise people around that because it feels like there's no project, and no point. The Green New Deal has been important as a vehicle for a visionary project that is simultaneously a concrete programme that seems plausible and possible to imagine. It's helped cut through the disabling sense of doom, but also through the idea of climate change being a matter for experts or scientists or technocrats. Previous iterations of climate politics have often involved very technocratic policies; for example, a complicated cap and trade system which you don't really understand and which somebody else is working out the details of behind the scenes. Which isn't to say that there aren't technical elements to any climate programme – obviously there are. But it's been important to have something concrete that people can engage with.

People in the environmental and climate justice world have realised that trying to do things the technocratic way over the years has failed; you need a popular programme to get people on board with making big changes. And that programme needs to speak to people not in the language of sacrifice and austerity but with a positive vision.

Finally, the concreteness also comes out of the fear of co-optation. You want to have a broadly popular programme and a big tent, insofar as you can realise that. But it can't be so big that anyone can just say, 'I'm doing the Green New Deal' if they're abandoning the social justice elements or the really strong climate commitments. Making it concrete makes it more difficult for other people to water down the project and appropriate the name.

GM: You said in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that part of this project is to undo the idea of the 'environmentalist' as an important political identity.⁵ *A Planet to Win* is very alert to the possibility of other environmentalisms like eco-apartheid and eco-modernism. Why do we need to unpick the idea of 'environmentalism'?

AB: I don't want to knock environmentalists per se, because they get a lot of shit already. But the treatment of environmental issues as *just* environmental issues – environmentalism as a kind of political project, environmentalists as a kind of political subject – leads to dead ends. That's because inherent in the idea of 'the

environment’ is a space separate from the rest of our world: separate from the economy, separate from social projects, separate from things that most people intuitively understand and care about. We need to banish that sense of separation.

A Planet to Win looks at how environment and climate are embedded in all these other parts of our lives and how that gives us opportunities to do environmental or climate politics in these different areas – to fight eco-apartheid through anti-racist politics, for example; to have these different modes or different kinds of environmentalisms but not necessarily to have to name them as such; and to look for climate action in places where we might not usually think to find ‘environmentalists’ working.

Daniel Aldana Cohen, my co-author, in his research on housing movements in São Paulo, has shown how people advocating for affordable housing, access to clean water and so on are undertaking a form of climate politics, even though they don’t identify as climate activists. They’re trying to build the kind of infrastructure that is needed for living a good, low-carbon life. We want to draw attention to that kind of work rather than just to look to the figure of the environmentalist. Plus ‘environmentalist’, I think, by now carries so much baggage that I don’t know if we should try to reclaim it – maybe we should just let go of it altogether.

GM: Do you have a preferred term to replace it? You use eco-socialist a few times in the book.

AB: I wasn’t a huge fan of ‘eco-socialist’ either, but I’ve come around. There’s not a great term to replace ‘environmentalist’. We end up using ‘green’ or ‘climate’ a lot as well; you need some kind of descriptor. But I’m not sure I have a good replacement for ‘environmentalist’ yet. Ultimately, it should be an assumption on the left that a left politics is an eco-socialist project: because climate and the environment are embedded in capitalism and in our political and social structures, the two can’t be separated. The environment has to be part of a broader left analysis.

The challenges ahead

GM: In our last issue, Adrienne Buller discussed three forms of opposition that the Green New Deal is going to face in Britain, and I wanted to get your take on them more broadly.⁶ They’re co-optation, continuity centrism and open hostility. You’ve talked about co-optation already. The continuity centrist position is the idea that we’re going to have more of the same kind of technocratic approach, all getting together at big international conferences, with nothing actually substantially happening.

AB: I think that those first two actually end up being pretty similar in practice if not sometimes in language. About a year ago, when the Green New Deal resolution

came out, all these Democratic would-be presidential candidates signed on to it, people I thought of as being barely left of centre. Basically continuity centrist types, signing on to a very progressive resolution. So we were very attuned to a sort of co-optation threat then.

But by now, in the US at least, the Green New Deal, or at least the language of the Green New Deal, has been very much associated with the left of the Democratic Party, the activist left, the Sunrise Movement, basically everything from the progressive left wing of the Democratic Party to the Democratic Socialists of America and more explicitly socialist formations. The Green New Deal is not Joe Biden's calling card, though he will talk about it here and there – which is a good sign, I think, of its power as a frame for talking about climate.

The people I would think of as continuity centrists are walking the line between co-optation and continuity centrism. They will say, 'Yes I'm going to sign on to the Paris Agreement and we'll also do some green spending', occasionally using the language of a Green New Deal, but they're not really making a case for the Green New Deal and at other times back away from even the language. When they gesture towards some of the elements of a Green New Deal, they also take care to paint the AOC Green New Deal as unrealistic: too much money, too vast, too much change, too radical.

GM: The third form of opposition is outright hostility. What's the political strategy for taking on the right-wing media – which is constantly pumping things out about AOC wanting to ban burgers – and fossil fuel lobbying groups?

AB: First, we should recognise we're not going to win over everyone on the right, or everyone who's watching the Fox News diatribes about hamburgers. There are some people you have to beat rather than win over.

But, in addition, some features of the discourse may only change in response to material changes. If you start spending money on green infrastructure, for example, and people in rural communities who might be sympathetic to Fox News see that materialise in their communities, that gives them a different kind of framing for climate action than just watching people rail against some so far amorphous thing that just exists on the news.

The problem is the chicken and egg problem – you have to start delivering on some of that stuff to start changing how people perceive it. Which is why moments of crisis would be a great time to start putting these things in motion.

I've been disappointed by how little the supposedly left media has engaged with the Green New Deal. There's this paradox: on the one hand, the Green New Deal is generally viewed favourably across parties, it polls well – it's unclear how much people know about it, but it has pretty high favourability ratings – and people are for

a lot of the individual elements, like green energy and a jobs guarantee. And yet the animosity towards a Green New Deal from people on the right seems to be stronger than the positivity from a broader swathe of people on the left.

The right have been good at talking about the Green New Deal as a negative thing all the time, whereas the progressive media – MSNBC, or whatever – is more invested in waging the war against the left wing of the party, the Pelosi v. AOC fight or whatever. The problem with the media isn't just the right-wing media, but also the representation of left-wing ideas in mainstream outlets. We saw this in a lot of the coverage of the primaries and I'm not sure how to solve it. There's been a huge growth in left publications and media representation in recent years, and yet cracking some of the mass, mainstream venues is tough.

Power, law and conflict

GM: Is there a need for constitutional changes to implement or fully realise the Green New Deal? How much of this can you meaningfully do through the current institutions?

AB: We certainly need some institutional changes. For example, we have to take seriously the idea of packing the Supreme Court. The anti-democratic nature of American institutions – the electoral college, the Senate – makes things extremely difficult. The Green New Deal is generally popular, but so are a lot of other policies and programmes that have not been implemented. A relatively small opposition can completely derail a lot of democratically popular projects. That's true not just of climate and Green New Deal projects, but of a lot of progressive politics across the board. It's hard to see how we will realise all of these things within our current institutional arrangements.

People on the left need to think more about how we use existing institutions, but also about how we use power to change the terms on which politics happens, in a way that is more democratic and more beneficial to the left. Republicans have been really good at doing that, at gerrymandering, at restricting voting, whether that's restricting the voting of people with felony convictions or just making it more difficult for people to vote. We've just seen in Wisconsin the ridiculous Supreme Court decision to have in-person voting go ahead in the midst of a pandemic. All of these things are very clear voter suppression, but the Republicans are able to do them because they're in power – and they recognise it; and I think they recognise that they have a minoritarian agenda.

We should think about those kinds of institutional changes too. Not in a cynical or craven way; not by suppressing votes, of course. But making our institutions more democratic, making it easier for people to vote, making government more reflective

of actual popular will would be good for a lot of the left programme. And there are things that we could do, short of full constitutional amendment, to achieve that.

GM: You mentioned packing the Supreme Court. A lot of environmental politics has taken place via the law, I guess because the state has been seen as being a dead end. What do you think about the law as an avenue for Green New Deal politics?

AB: I think the climate movement needs to move away from the legislative strategies – ‘sue the bastards’ – that we’ve had since the passing of the 1970s environmental legislation. That won some short-term victories, but in the long term has diverted attention from building a mass movement. It’s also capital intensive – you spend a lot of money on these legal strategies, you pay lawyers, but most people don’t know what’s happening or have any connection to it. And obviously now, when you have a hostile Supreme Court, that becomes a losing strategy, and meanwhile you don’t have an organised movement to undertake other strategies. I would want to pack the courts more as a defence against intervention than as a way to advance the political programme.

GM: Because if you were to start to implement a Green New Deal it would come under attack from the legal system?

AB: Yes, it absolutely would. The fact that not only the Supreme Court but also the federal judiciary and the whole judicial system in this country have been slowly taken over by the right is a real challenge for any progressive politics, let alone eco-socialism, right now. The constitution itself, and the treatment of the constitution in the legal apparatus of the country, makes it really difficult to do some of the things that we would want to do.

GM: Are there specific things that you think it would be difficult to do, or do you think they’d simply throw everything at you across the board?

AB: It would be across the board. The Clean Air Act has already been stretched about as far as it can go to regulate carbon emissions under the Massachusetts vs. EPA decision, and I don’t think there is much else we can do with existing law. But there are just so many points at which somebody can launch a lawsuit that would impede a Green New Deal, whether it’s attacking the EPA’s jurisdiction or challenging the ability to use eminent domain to build high-speed rail or various forms of big green infrastructure.

GM: There’s a real sense in *A Planet to Win*, and in the project more broadly, of conflict. You clearly state the need to identify your enemies. Can you expand on why that’s important to the project?

AB: For a couple of reasons. Firstly just because we *have* enemies. The obvious one is the fossil fuel industry, which clearly has the most to lose from something like the

Green New Deal. But the opposition could come from a whole range of directions, ranging from private real estate developers – who aren't going to be interested in things like rent control, building green public housing, or anything that would threaten their position in the real estate market – to the many industries downstream from the fossil fuel industry, like the aeroplane and automobile industries. In some of these areas, there's the potential for internal transformation – building electric cars or whatever – but if we're also calling for more collective consumption and provision, and less private consumption, that will affect a wide range of industries.

It's important to say that there are people for whom this is actually threatening. Because they're going to come after the Green New Deal, and we should be prepared.

But it's also really important to get away from the more common framing of climate and environmental crisis as being the fault of all of us: something that we're all complicit in, and thus, implicitly, all equally responsible for. Because we know that's just not true. We know it's not true empirically – if you look at the distribution of carbon emissions, historically and geographically, or by income and part of the world, and so on.

Equally, though, it's not like you can make a list of people who are somewhere on the spectrum – 'you've emitted more carbon, you're the enemy' – that's not really the point. Rather, we need to look at the structural conditions that generate carbon emissions and pick a fight around that. It's not about how Rex Tillerson is personally the worst person on earth. He might well be; but the point is that if you are a fossil fuel executive, you are in a position where you are compelled to perpetuate the system that eventually will kill us all. But it is because of the positions people hold that they are our enemies. We have to recognise that there are structural enemies to eco-socialism and we have to be ready to face them.

GM: One legal avenue for a politics of the Green New Deal that you suggest is trying people for crimes against humanity.

AB: Yes. We propose bringing people like Rex Tillerson and other fossil fuel executives to the Hague and trying out new forms of crimes against humanity charges. It's very hard to allocate individual responsibility for climate change, of course, but we need to hold fossil fuel executives who have spent decades actively spreading disinformation in order to make it more difficult to address climate change responsible.

Possible futures

GM: The US is either going to get four more years of Trump or four years of Biden, and neither case involves the Green New Deal. Can you build some of this at state level or more local levels?

AB: Definitely. We have seen a lot of action at state level, and even at municipal level, in the US, in light of continued federal inaction. I'm sure we'll see more of this sort of small-scale experimentation, which can be really exciting. One of the things that's been really interesting is seeing a couple of cities, like Kansas City, experimenting with free public transportation for a year or so. For a city like New York or Boston to have free public transportation would be amazing. A lot of these transit systems don't get the majority of their revenue from fares. Right now, a lot of them are facing a funding crisis because of coronavirus and the decline in both riders and state revenue. But what if we just funded one of these systems to be freely accessible, instead of, as has recently happened in New York, paying cops to arrest people for not paying their fares?

That's just one small example; there are a lot of exciting places where you could implement some of the Green New Deal. Some of the housing programmes we've talked about are particularly amenable to being implemented at state or municipal levels.

There are limits, though. One is that there are some projects which you really do have to do on a federal level. You would want a big green public grid to span the whole country, for example. Then there's the problem that some states have the money and the inclination to start engaging in Green New Deal projects, and others are just not going to of their own accord. So you'd have a really uneven roll out. I'm sure that would be true under a federal programme too. But if you had a lot of federal money suddenly flowing into green projects in red states that have less state revenue and are also more hostile to climate politics, I suspect you would see a lot less resistance.

There are real disparities between state and federal spending capacity that are probably going to be exacerbated by coronavirus. A lot of state budgets are going to be hit really hard. It's probably not going to be a great time for state spending projects in the coming years, unfortunately. But there's still potential. And even if there was a federal Green New Deal, you would still want to take ideas from states and from cities, about things that have worked well, and use these experiments to scale up. But the federal level is important, because money and power are on a different scale there. A Biden presidency is not a Bernie presidency, but I can see him at least putting more money into green infrastructure, trying to throw some Green New Deal bones, even if he's not going to be out there pushing for the full Green New Deal. Even just having some chunk of federal money going into these projects could be an important start. I'm trying to stay hopeful for that.

GM: I wanted to finish by talking about hope. In the book you talk a lot about imagining: imagining a Green New Deal, imagining the future. You're quite open that you're probably not going to get all of what you imagine, but it's worth the imaginative exercise. Bluntly, how much hope do you have? How optimistic are you that this crucial decade is going to be the 'decade of the Green New Deal'?

AB: I'm not an optimist in general, and, maybe contrary to the tone of the book, I usually don't feel terribly hopeful. The thing that, honestly, I find the most motivating is the fact that things can get worse, and I think will get worse, and might get very much worse, so we can't give up. The practice of imagining and working towards something that could be better is really important to me in countering the pessimism I often feel. Since the coronavirus crisis began, things have felt really grim in a lot of ways, but I'm trying to remember that it's also a reminder that a lot can change really quickly, and is going to change really quickly.

I really like the 'decade of the Green New Deal' slogan – it communicates the urgency of the present moment – but it doesn't mean this is the only moment.

We try to think of the Green New Deal as a political project for a multi-decade reconfiguration of political economy. I'd rather be starting it off with Bernie heading into the presidential election, of course, putting forward the vision of a better future amidst a global health and economic crisis. But since that's not the case, we'll have to figure out other avenues. So maybe I'm not optimistic, but I'm trying to be determined.

Alyssa Battistoni is an Environmental Fellow at Harvard University, an editor of *Jacobin*, and a co-author of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*.

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Notes

- 1 Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why we need a Green New Deal*, Verso 2019.
- 2 Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, 'We can waste another crisis, or we can transform the economy', *Jacobin*, 14 March 2020: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/green-new-deal-coronavirus-stimulus>.
- 3 https://medium.com/@green_stimulus_now/a-green-stimulus-to-rebuild-our-economy-1e7030a1d9ee.
- 4 Ann Pettifor, *The Case for the Green New Deal*, Verso 2019, p170.
- 5 Wen Stephenson, 'Climate, Commonwealth, and the Green New Deal: a conversation with Alyssa Battistoni and Jebediah Britton-Purdy', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 March 2020: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/climate-commonwealth-and-the-green-new-deal-a-conversation-with-alyssa-battistoni-and-jebediah-britton-purdy/>.
- 6 Adrienne Buller, 'Where next for the Green New Deal?', *Renewal*, Vol 28 No 1, 2020.