

# The contradictions of Green New Deals: green sacrifice and colonialism

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Large-scale solutions to the climate crisis drawn up  
in the global North too often remain embedded in  
colonial relations of injustice.

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**I**n her discussion of liberalism as a historical project, Lisa Lowe comments that its ‘abstract promises of freedom often obscure their embeddedness within colonial conditions’:

Race and social difference ... are enduring remainders of colonial processes through which ‘the human’ is universalized and ‘freed’ by liberal forms, while the peoples who create the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Lowe here refers to slavery. She is discussing the connections between the nineteenth-century liberal discourse advocating the abolition of the slave trade and a number of other contemporary developments: the introduction of millions of Chinese and Indian indentured labourers to the Americas (for whom promises of freedom remained out of reach); the dispossession of indigenous peoples through settler logics of appropriation, forced removal and assimilation; and the expansion

## Soundings

of empire and capitalist economic relations through the transatlantic trade of commodities such as tea, cotton, silk and opium, which boosted the rise of British 'free trade imperialism'. Lowe shows how entrenched ideas about racial and social difference - evident for example in the representation and treatment of Chinese coolies, as well as the dispossession of indigenous populations of their land - not only sustained the conditions upon which liberal discourses of universalised freedom were dependent, and in which they were embedded, but also ran in parallel to an attempt to erase them from the archival record, in order to obliterate their function.

I would like to draw attention in this essay to the risk that something similar could happen with the large-scale climate change interventions that have become prominent of late, particularly some of the interventions labelled as part of a 'just transition'. This includes some of the problems associated with the various versions of the Green New Deal (GND) that are circulating in the global North.

Specifically, I want to present the hypothesis that promises of justice and universal salvation from climate chaos by means of GNDs in the global North may obscure their embeddedness in contemporary colonial relations of injustice, which remain premised on assumptions of race and social difference. I want to highlight the ways in which GND discourse and practice may downplay, or render invisible, the consequences that low-carbon transition plans have for the communities and ecosystems who are called upon - or even expected - to provide the infrastructure for such salvation. The resources that are seen as vital for northern Green New Deals are very often located in the global South, and this has serious consequences for environmental justice. The concern here is that the communities and ecosystems from which these resources are extracted risk becoming Green Sacrifice Zones; and that the sacrifice zone logic will be expanded to include other sites necessary for the sourcing, transportation, installation, operation and waste clear-up that goes along with the creation of the infrastructure for a just transition.<sup>2</sup>

As GNDs advance in some parts of the global North, and are enthusiastically adopted by vigorous civil society organisations, it is important for civil society and environmental activism to draw attention to the risk and policy implications of a proliferation of green sacrifice zones, among policy-makers and activist circles.

# The contradictions of Green New Deals

## Green New Deals and just transition

GNDs are comprehensive policy plans which aim to deliver a large-scale transformation of global North economies in order to address the climate crisis. They are not only meant as projects beneficial for the societies that would implement them; they regularly style themselves as efforts to provide universal salvation from climate change - from the 'existential threat to Europe and the world'.<sup>3</sup>

In the last few years, several plans for GNDs have emerged. In early 2019, US House Representative Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, together with Democrat Senator Ed Markey, made an unsuccessful attempt to commit the US government to a GND. In April 2021, Ocasio-Cortez and Markey reintroduced their GND Resolution,<sup>4</sup> and since that year the US administration's climate agenda has shared some of the Ocasio-Markey agenda.

Other notable attempts to establish a comprehensive, large scale, state-funded programme in the form of a GND include the adoption of a GND as a party commitment by the UK's Labour Party in September 2019; the elaboration of an ambitious and detailed GND plan by Bernie Sanders's campaign to become the Democratic Nominee for the 2020 US President election; and the adoption of a GND as a campaign platform by the Australian Greens.

But even more notably, since late 2019, the EU has had its own version, the European Green Deal (EGD), a €1 trillion plan to make the EU's economy sustainable. This is also fashioned as the Union's 'new growth strategy' - it will help transform the Union 'into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy'.<sup>5</sup> The EU has also tied its €1.8 trillion Covid recovery package to the achievement of several European Green Deal strategic objectives. At the time of writing, outside the EU only South Korea has explicitly adopted a GND as a government policy framework (the K-New Deal), and as a key element of its post-Covid-19 recovery package.

Though differences between the different versions of the GND do exist, they all explicitly include 'just transition' as an essential part of the project. For example, the UK Labour Party's motion stipulated that: 'in power Labour will oversee a just transition, increasing the number of well-paid, unionised green jobs in the UK through largescale investment in renewables and low-carbon energy'. And one of the five main goals of the 2019 US Resolution version of the GND was to 'achieve net-

## Soundings

zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition *for all communities and workers*' (my italics).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the EGD makes provisions for 'a Just Transition Mechanism, including a Just Transition Fund, *to leave no one behind*' (my italics).<sup>7</sup>

Just transition requires that the shift to low-carbon societies is as equitable as possible by ensuring decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication, side-by-side with climate action. So, for example, the EU Just Transition Fund is endowed with €17.5 billion (in 2018 prices) to support the EU's Just Transition Mechanism, which is set up to benefit: companies and sectors in EU member states that are active in or comprise carbon-intensive industries; EU member states and regions with high dependence on fossil fuel and carbon-intensive industries; and people and citizens in EU member states who are most vulnerable to the transition, mainly through facilitating employment opportunities and ensuring access to clean energy.<sup>8</sup>

All these are important measures; yet they are provisions for care and support for those within the borders of the Union, and more specifically for industries, communities and individuals who will be affected by the decommissioning of carbon-intensive activities. This begs the question: what goes on at the 'opposite' side of things? How about the justice implications of a just transition outside the borders of major economies seeking to decarbonise? And how about the justice implications for the spaces affected by the provision of green solutions within Europe, not just for those in Europe affected by the decommissioning of dirty industries?

### **Providing the infrastructure for low-carbon transition: green sacrifice**

As I said, Lowe claims that liberal narratives of universal freedom disavow the embeddedness of the liberal world in colonial relations that are premised on race and social difference: inequalities based on difference have been fundamental to the provision of the infrastructure that sustains that freedom.

Dominant GND narratives continue to emphasise concepts cherished by liberalism - such as market freedom - as a means to advance on the ladder of progress; this is particularly - although not exclusively - so when it comes to sketching GND implications for places outside the global North. For example, a 2020 European Commission call for research proposals in the context of the EGD pictures Africa as a continent with 'an enormous renewable energy potential', yet one

## The contradictions of Green New Deals

that is faced with ‘major challenges related to ... the development of its industrial base to create much needed jobs’. The call invites research whose medium-term impact will be the ‘creation of new market opportunities for both European and African companies in the African continent’.<sup>9</sup> There appears to be no questioning of the ways in which ‘markets’ (very often in the form of global corporates) operate to create further inequalities.

Dominant GND narratives are mute on the adverse impacts of achieving a just transition outside the global North. Those impacts are perhaps most prominent in the sourcing of materials: green solutions for the North are often based on mining unprecedented quantities of minerals from global South localities. These are called ‘transition minerals’. Many communities, activists and academic and other commentators are concerned that a new wave of transition-mineral extractivism is likely to follow on from ambitious plans for transitioning global North economies into low-carbon futures.<sup>10</sup>

A recent study commissioned by the World Bank points out that in order to have a 50 per cent chance of limiting global temperature increase to 2°C by 2100, some 3.1 billion tons of seventeen core minerals will need to be extracted, and that demand for key transition minerals, such as lithium, cobalt and graphite, could increase by approximately 500 per cent by 2050.<sup>11</sup> This is because the technologies associated with several solutions advanced as crucial for GND-related low-carbon transitions make use of transition minerals.

Take, for example, electric vehicles, a flagship solution of the EGD (and among the main solutions of US versions of the GND). These are expected to drastically decrease the greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) of road transport, which accounts for over 70 per cent of all GHG of the transport sector in Europe, which in turn is responsible for almost a quarter of Europe’s GHG.<sup>12</sup> The EU’s objective is to achieve the circulation of some 30 million electric vehicles on European roads by 2030. Yet, according to the European Automobile Manufacturers’ Association, the number of electric vehicles was 615,000 in 2019, which implies an expected 50-fold increase within ten years.<sup>13</sup> The mining implications of this are complex and considerable.

Today’s dominant type of electric vehicle battery is the lithium-ion battery, for the manufacturing of which lithium and cobalt are essential. More than half of global lithium reserves are located in the Lithium Triangle (an area between Argentina, Bolivia and Chile), which at the same time is one of the driest places on the planet.<sup>14</sup>

## Soundings

Even in the absence of additional pressure from EGD demands, ongoing lithium extraction (e.g. in the Chilean side of the Triangle) has already put substantial stress on the limited water resources used by farmers in the area; and in the pursuit of these minerals, mining companies from across the globe are striking controversial agreements with indigenous communities that are transforming indigenous societies, producing tensions, fractures and strains on their social fabric.<sup>15</sup> Industry analysts project an increase of South American lithium production of almost 200 per cent by 2025, even in the absence of GNDs in the economies of the global North. Sixty-eight per cent of global lithium reserves are located in poorer countries in the global South (excluding China).

On the cobalt front, things do not look much different. Global demand for cobalt is expected to outstrip supply by 64,000 tonnes in 2030, and once more this is without accounting for potential demand from global North GNDs. Almost 50 per cent of cobalt reserves globally are found in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in a region that is among the ten most polluted areas in the world. Leaving aside for a moment the links with that country's deadly civil war, which has claimed approximately 6 million lives, mining in the area involves dangerous working conditions, and the use of child labour is widespread. Sixty-seven per cent of global reserves of cobalt are found in poorer countries in the global South (excluding China).

Another transition mineral necessary for electric vehicle batteries - which has received less attention - is nickel, whose demand is expected to increase six-fold by 2030, mostly due to automotive electrification.<sup>16</sup> Nickel extraction is not only polluting: it is also highly energy-intensive. It has the highest impact per kilogram extracted (together with copper); and its extraction and smelting, in combination with six other metals, contributes to 7 per cent of global annual emissions.<sup>17</sup> In 2017, at least 60 per cent of nickel production came from global South countries.<sup>18</sup> In 2020, Indonesia and the Philippines were the top two nickel producers (approximately 43 per cent of global production).<sup>19</sup> According to Global Witness, in 2018 mining and extractives was the sector that topped the rankings for the highest number of killings of environmental defenders, and the Philippines was the country that topped that harrowing list.<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, multinational mining companies miss no opportunity to justify the negative effects of their mining activity (including endangering vital ecosystems

## The contradictions of Green New Deals

and water supplies) upon local communities by recourse to the claim that their 'products are essential to the transition to a low carbon economy'.<sup>21</sup>

Although places with colonial and settler-colonial pasts stand first in line to be among the most affected, in Europe itself - the historical heartland and beneficiary of colonialism - some of the more peripheral or 'disadvantaged' areas are not immune. Recently, the EC released its action plan on critical raw materials. Preoccupied not only with growing scarcity and global political volatility, but also with the fear of prolonged or recurring trade-wars and pandemics that risk obstructing the steady provision of strategic materials, the Commission emphasises the need to 'insource' minerals from within the EU. Indeed, public and private investment has already been mobilised to supply lithium from European sources - specifically four mines within the EU - with the Commission expecting that by 2025 they would be able to satisfy 80 per cent of Europe's lithium demand.<sup>22</sup> In Spain, some communities have already had a taste of the implications of this. In the western-Spain city of Caceres, an EU-backed mining project is planning to extract lithium from an open pit mine less than 2km from the city, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site.<sup>23</sup> Some calculate that the Caceres reserve is the second biggest lithium reserve in the EU. At the same time, Extremadura, the region in which Caceres is located, is in ninth position in terms of unemployment among the 281 regions of the EU.<sup>24</sup>

Given the historical record of corporate activity, and the expected rise in demand for transition minerals at a global level, one should be at least sceptical about the claim that the expansion of mining activity in Europe would involve a reduction in toxic mining pressures outside it - as some companies argue. Or about the claim that this 'inward' expansion of mining is a positive corporate trend, in that it involves mining under the highly regulated labour conditions of Europe, in contrast to the 'weak' regulatory frameworks in places like Africa or Latin America. The racism and 'move to innocence' involved in such arguments is hard to miss: the corporations and their representatives who articulate such sentiments apparently are exculpating themselves from ever having created, or simply exploited, such 'weak' frameworks in their search for profit and capital accumulation.

Adverse impacts on the environment are expected to occur across *the whole chain of provision* of clean energy, namely: the transportation of materials, assemblage of green production infrastructure, siting of facilities to produce energy, and dealing with waste at the end-of-life of green infrastructure.

## Soundings

For example, wind turbine waste is already piling up in landfills in rural Wyoming, Iowa and North Dakota. As the first generation of wind turbines is reaching the end of its operational life, and in light of blade recycling solutions being either not available on an industrial scale, or very expensive, a minimum of 720,000 tonnes of blade material will be up for disposal over the next twenty years in the US alone.

When it comes to siting, past experience with renewable energy production in the global South shows that supplying global North economies with low-carbon energy regularly dispossesses poor rural communities, in a continuation of older colonial relationships. A possible flagship case here is that of the largest concentrated solar power plant in the world, Morocco's Noor Power Station complex, south of the Atlas Mountains. Constructed with capital from the European Investment Bank and by a consortium of Spanish construction companies, Noor provides renewable-energy-generated electricity not only to Morocco and other countries in the region, but also to Europe, through submarine cables that connect it to the Spanish electricity grid. (The aspiration of the initial project was to build several similar solar and wind energy facilities in the region in order to cover no less than 15 per cent of Europe's electricity needs.) The land necessary for constructing the Noor complex is approximately the size of Morocco's capital, Rabat, and its construction involved the dispossession of local rural and pastoral communities from their land through characterising it as 'marginal' and 'under-utilised'.<sup>25</sup> These recurring neo-colonial patterns are hard to ignore.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, in Spain, an unprecedented expansion of wind and solar power facilities has been taking place since 2019. In what is certainly a positive policy turn, Spain has put in place its own just transition policy framework (Ecological Transition), and has set up a Ministry for Ecological Transition which has already developed a National Energy and Climate Plan that sets a target of 42 per cent renewable energy use in Spain by 2030.<sup>26</sup> In 2019 (the last year of available data), solar photovoltaic and wind energy capacity each increased by approximately 20 per cent - a year when Spain was the country with the highest added solar photovoltaic capacity and the second highest onshore wind energy capacity in the EU.<sup>27</sup> In 2021, thousands more solar and wind farm applications are under consideration. Meanwhile, the country already has the highest installed concentrated solar thermal capacity in the world (almost 50



## The contradictions of Green New Deals

per cent of the global total);<sup>28</sup> and it also hosts the biggest photovoltaic plant in Europe, as well as currently being in the process of building an even bigger one - which is, tellingly, named after the sixteenth-century conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Spain also has the fifth biggest wind energy installed capacity worldwide, and the second biggest in the EU.<sup>29</sup>

The intensity and pace of those changes has raised concerns about the biodiversity and land-availability implications of such a massification of renewables infrastructure. This has resulted in the creation of several protest groups in rural Spain, some of which have requested a moratorium on planning permits for renewables facilities, a perspective that worries both renewables companies and promoters and some environmentalists. Protest groups are concerned that substantial amounts of land are being removed from agricultural activities in order to obtain the more lucrative rents offered by solar farm developers - a concern that is acute, for example, in rural Catalonia, where farmer trade unions calculate that almost 50 per cent of farmers are tenant farmers. And there are also fears about coercive state measures to ensure the smooth installation of renewable industries, such as land expropriation - which has already been enforced by state agencies, which declare corporate renewables projects as projects of 'public interest'. Those concerns are steadily becoming more visible. In October 2021, thousands of protesters from 180 protest groups marched in the streets of Madrid voicing their opposition to industrial scale renewable energy projects in rural Spain under the slogan 'Renovables sí, pero no así' ('Yes to Renewables but not Like This').<sup>30</sup>

Despite important differences within and outside the global North in the processes involved in building the infrastructure for low-carbon transition, one thing that connects concerns and protest in Africa, Latin America, Europe and elsewhere is *the invisibility of the sacrifices they are required to make*. When sacrifice or justice are discussed in mainstream versions of the GND, the focus is on the implications of low-carbon transition upon groups and communities related to the fossil fuel industry *within* transitioning economies; it is not focused on the communities and ecologies - both within, but perhaps most importantly outside, those economies - that will be adversely affected by the implementation of proposed solutions to the climate crisis. Engagement and discussion of the level and type of sacrifice demanded has little part in mainstream accounts of the march to a just, low-carbon economy; nor is there evidence of any intention to obtain a comprehensive picture

# Soundings

of which populations and ecologies are to be sacrificed and by what means. Such discussion does not mean that a choice has to be made about whether or not to suspend the process of low-carbon transition and GNDs; it means, rather, that there is a need to consider how the transition to an economy powered by renewables can be more democratic, as well as being accompanied by generous reductions of energy consumption in the global North.

## Colonialism and beyond

I would like to add a disclaimer here. I do not think that what this discussion about green sacrifice implies is that the idea of a just transition, or of GNDs, should be thrown into the infamous 'dustbin of history'. GNDs are some of the boldest moves for large-scale, equality-oriented systemic transformations to global North economies in order to address the climate crisis. However, I do think that their justice complexities are not being sufficiently considered by those designing and advancing them. There is a real danger that green dystopias will proliferate in the course of the search to achieve a just transition to low-carbon economies in the global North, through the overlooking, and indeed disconnecting, of those projects - and their justice and climate salvation promises - from the colonial nature of some of their assumptions and representations. A discussion about this risk should be an integral part of the debates that inform policy design about GNDs.

I don't think that the game is entirely lost. And one thing that could help us navigate past the contradictions of a just low-carbon transition is a serious look at the climate action that has been taken by frontline and vulnerable communities themselves, and by this I mean all those communities that find themselves at the frontline of the implementation of climate solutions. This means places where the resources and infrastructure for the low-carbon economy are located, as well as communities at the frontline of climate impacts, side-by-side with those experiencing the impact of industries foregone because of decarbonisation.

Unfortunately, the objections of such communities to the sacrifices required of them in the name of a low-carbon transition are oftentimes characterised as unreasonable, and as of lesser importance; at times, such communities are even regarded as a politically regressive nuisance impeding the honourable quest to achieve a low-carbon world - the need for which has finally been realised by major governments. Given the colonial complexities connected to the conundrum I have

## The contradictions of Green New Deals

been discussing - which could be summarised as 'where is all the material for low-carbon transition going to come from, and *in what ways*' - such characterisations reveal a colonial mindset, and an obliviousness to the operation of power, among some sections of the just transition project. This particularly manifests itself in one of colonialism's major traits, its rhetoric of salvation via newness.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the resource-seeking companies and governments supporting them present themselves as offering not only global salvation from the threat of climate change but also local salvation for communities in green sacrifice zones - who will be offered much-needed employment opportunities and economic development. This is a claim commonly advanced by mining companies and wind and solar farm operators; and this 'newness', in the form of an ecologically-conscious modernity, translates itself into a plan that sees itself as having finally managed to combine climate action with economic growth and development.

To go beyond such colonial attitudes, the key is to start by listening to what frontline and vulnerable communities themselves say when they speak about just transition and GNDs. This is what decolonisation requires.

Native American scholar Kyle Powys Whyte understands the fear of climate collapse as an existential fear about the possibility of the loss of one's world as he or she knows it.<sup>32</sup> But, as he explains, with the onslaught of colonialism, indigenous communities all around the world have not only lived with that threat for a long time; they have also seen it materialise. Having survived the materialisation of that fear, the experience and knowledge of indigenous communities offer us some of the best possible guidance for managing our current predicament of fear and loss in the face of an uncertain and complex future. Indeed, Powys Whyte outlines examples of Native American political institutions that are tailored to the need to adapt to constant change, which could serve as models for designing political institutions in a wider - and warming - world.

Similarly, leadership in taking climate action has already been shown by communities tagged by mainstream versions of GNDs as 'frontline and vulnerable' - as for example the communities that form part of the Climate Justice Alliance, and the Indigenous Environmental Network (both in the US). This should be seen as an indication of the capacity of such communities to lead the way in designing and effecting climate action. Importantly, their leadership is also crucial for the design of elaborate policy frameworks for a just transition.<sup>33</sup>

# Soundings

Similar initiatives are taking place in other parts of the global South, for example through the Latin American Pacto Ecosocial del Sur; and they can also be seen at the interstices or margins of the old colonial metropolis, such as in the Balkan Green Deal in the Western Balkans, a grassroots project which seeks to challenge the EU's formal agenda for a Green Deal in the region by integrating intersectional feminism principles in the bottom-up design of a just transition agenda.<sup>34</sup>

These are not sites where we simply look for solutions that can be cherry-picked for inclusion to GND plans that would then be elaborated far from frontline and vulnerable communities; they are places to look for leadership, and projects and experiences whose potential for upscaling should be taken seriously. Furthermore, decolonising GNDs, and just-transitions more generally, is not simply a question of greater participation: it's a question of stopping colonial land encroachments and dismantling colonial labour relations; and it involves challenging leadership assumptions about which people and what frameworks should guide a just decarbonisation.

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# The contradictions of Green New Deals

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## Soundings

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