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GROWING A GREEN NEW DEAL: AGRICULTURE'S ROLE IN ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: The Green New Deal offers a chance not only to fashion legislative proposals that can advance economic justice and ecological sustainability but also create space for conversation about the unjust and unsustainable nature of capitalism and the industrial worldview. One key component of both legislation and conversation should be a response to the crisis in contemporary agriculture. Repopulating the countryside and developing ecologically based farming practices will be central to creating a more just and sustainable society.

Keywords: Agriculture, Farming, Climate Change, Ecology, Sustainability, Economic Justice, Capitalism, Green New Deal

Debates over legislation can reveal not only people's positions on specific issues but also more basic worldviews, as is the case with the Green New Deal. Propelled by the energy of progressive legislators elected in the 2018 midterm elections, a Green New Deal resolution in the U.S. House (House Resolution 109, 2019) attracted 67 cosponsors, with a number of prominent senators lining up to join them. Decades of activism by groups working on climate change and other ecological crises, along with a surge of support in recent years for democratic socialism, has opened up new political

opportunities for serious discussion of the intersection of social justice and sustainability.

The Green New Deal proposal—which is a resolution, not a bill, offering only a broad outline of goals that will require more detailed legislative proposals—reflects an understanding that the economics of contemporary society are based on a domination/subordination dynamic that is incompatible with a just society. For some supporters, this kind of proposal is a first step toward transcending capitalism and moving toward a partnership model that puts human caring above material acquisition as the primary goal. In ecological terms, the resolution hints at a new relationship between humans and the larger living world, with a deeper respect for the non-human. But for some of us who support the initiative, the proposal remains mired in the failed project of relying on high-energy advanced technology to resolve a deeper crisis in humans' use of the planet.

Since the Green New Deal will not be successful right out of the gate—many centrist Democrats are lukewarm, and most Republicans are hostile—supporters have plenty of time to consider crucial questions, such as How "Green" will we have to get to create a truly sustainable society? and Is a "New Deal" a sufficient response to the multiple, cascading economic/ecological crises we face?

We can also use this proposal to wrestle with strategic questions: Should a Green New Deal limit itself to a *reformist* agenda that proposes programs that can be passed as soon as possible, or should it advance a more *revolutionary* agenda aimed at challenging our economic system? Should those of us concerned about economic justice and ecological sustainability be *realistic* or *radical*?

Our answer—yes to all—does not avoid tough choices. The false dichotomies of reform v. revolution and realistic v. radical too often encourage self-marginalizing squabbles among people working for change. Philosophical and strategic differences exist among

critics of the existing systems of power, of course, but collaborative work is possible—if all parties can agree that while trying to enact limited policies that are possible in the short term, we do not ignore the potentially catastrophic long-term threats. Reforms can take us beyond a reformist agenda when pursued with revolutionary ideals. Radical proposals are often more realistic than policies crafted out of fear of going to the root of a problem.

Our proposal for an agricultural component for a Green New Deal offers an example of this approach. Humans need a revolutionary new way of producing food, which must go forward with a radical critique of capitalism's ideology and the industrial worldview, both of which are systems of domination that undermine the potential of partnership within the human family and between the human family and the larger living world. Reforms can begin to bring those revolutionary ideas to life, and realistic proposals can be radical in helping to change worldviews.

In this article we focus on two proposals for a Green New Deal that are politically viable today but also point us toward the deeper long-term change needed: (1) job training that could help repopulate the countryside and change how farmers work, and (2) research on perennial grain crops that could change how we farm. Two existing organizations, the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota and The Land Institute in Kansas, offer models for successful work in these areas. [Editor's Note: See the article "Sustainable Agriculture—Going to the Root of the Problem: A Conversation with Wes Jackson, Interviewed by Riane Eisler," in this issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* (Vol. 6 Issue #1)].

PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

We begin by foregrounding our critique of capitalism and the industrial worldview. All policy proposals are based on a vision of the future that we seek, and an assessment of

the existing systems that create impediments to moving toward that vision. In a politically healthy and intellectually vibrant democracy, policy debates should start with articulations of those visions and assessments. "Pragmatists"—those who appoint themselves as guardians of common sense—are quick to warn against getting bogged down in ideological debates and/or talk of the future, advising that we must focus on what works today within existing systems. But accepting that barely camouflaged defense of the status quo guarantees that people with power today will remain in power, in the same institutions serving the same interests. It is more productive to debate big ideas as we move toward compromise on policy. Compromise without vision is capitulation.

Green New Deal proposals should not only offer a set of specific policy proposals but also articulate a new way of seeing humans and our place in the ecosphere. At the core of our worldview is the belief that:

- People are not merely labor machines in the production process or customers in a mass-consumption economy. Economic systems must create meaningful work (along with an equitable distribution of wealth) and healthy communities (along with fulfilled individuals).
- The more-than-human world (what we typically call "nature") cannot be treated as if the planet is nothing more than a mine for extraction and a dump for wastes. Economic systems must make possible a sustainable human presence on the planet.

These two statements of values are a direct challenge to capitalism and the industrial worldview that currently define the global economy. Fueled by the dense energy in coal, oil, and natural gas, industrial capitalism has been the most wildly productive economic system in human history, but it routinely fails to produce meaning in people's lives and it draws down the ecological capital of the planet at a rate well beyond replacement levels. Most of the contemporary U.S. political establishment assumes these systems will continue in perpetuity, but Green New Deal advocates can challenge

that by speaking to how their proposals meet human needs for meaning-in-community and challenge the illusion of infinite growth on a finite planet.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

In an urban society and industrial economy dominated by finance, many people do not think of agriculture as either a significant economic sector or a threat to ecological sustainability. With less than two percent of the population employed in agriculture, farming is "out of sight, out of mind" for most of the population. To deal effectively with both economic and ecological crises, a Green New Deal should include agricultural policies that support smaller farms with more farmers, living in viable rural economies and communities, and advance alternatives to annual monoculture industrial farming, which is a major contributor to global warming and the degradation of ecosystems.

These concerns for the declining health of rural communities and ecosystems are connected. Economic and cultural forces have made farming increasingly unprofitable for small family operations and encouraged young people to view education as a vehicle to escape the farm. The command from the industrial worldview was "get big or get out" (Philpott, 2008), and the not-so-subtle hint to young people has been that social status comes with managerial, technical, and intellectual careers in cities. The economic drivers have encouraged increasingly industrialized agriculture, adding to soil erosion and land degradation in the pursuit of short-term yield increases. The dominant culture tells us that markets know best and advanced technology is always better than traditional methods.

Today one hears of how rural America and its people are ignored, but a more accurate term would be exploited—an "economic colonization of rural America" (Ikerd, n.d.). Agricultural land is exploited, as are below-ground mineral and water resources, typically in ecologically destructive fashion. Meanwhile, recreation areas are

"preserved," largely for use by city people. The injuries to land and people are, in economists' vocabulary, externalities; rural people, the land, and its creatures pay costs that are not factored into economic transactions. Responding to the crises in rural America is crucial in any program aimed at building a just and sustainable society.

FARMER TRAINING

Much of the discussion about job training/retraining for a Green Economy focuses on technical skills needed for solar-panel installation, weatherizing homes, etc.—important projects that are politically realistic, culturally palatable, and technologically mature today. But a sustainable future with dramatic reductions in fossil-fuel consumption also requires a redesigned agricultural system, which requires more people on the land. We need the appropriate "eyes-to-acres ratio" (Berry, 2015) that makes it possible to farm in an ecologically responsibly manner, according to Wes Jackson, co-founder of The Land Institute (TLI) and a leader in the sustainable agriculture movement.

A visionary Green New Deal proposal would, as a first step, provide support for programs to expand farming and farm-related occupations in rural areas, part of a long-term project to repopulate the countryside in preparation for the more labor-intensive sustainable agriculture that we would like to see today and will be necessary in the future. The goal is "land-conserving communities and healthy regional economies," to borrow from the mission statement of The Berry Center (n.d.), which understands that both people and the land thrive when farmers have the chance to collaborate rather than merely compete. The dominant culture equates urban with the progressive and modern, and rural with the unsophisticated and backward, a prejudice that must be challenged not only in the world of ideas but also on the ground.

The Land Stewardship Project (LSP; n.d.) offers a template, with three successful training programs. A four-hour Farm Dreams workshop helps people clarify their

motivations to farm and begins a process of identifying resources and needs, with help from an experienced farmer. In farmer-led classroom sessions, on-farm tours, and an extensive farmer network, the Farm Beginnings course is a one-year program designed for prospective farmers with some experience who are ready to start a farm, whether or not they currently own land. The two-year Journeyperson course supports people who have been managing their own farms and need guidance to improve or expand their operations for long-term success.

There are, of course, many other farm-training programs from non-profits, governmental agencies, and educational institutions. We highlight LSP, which was founded in 1982, because of its track record and flexibility in responding to political conditions and community needs, particularly its willingness to engage critiques of racial injustice. Support for such programs is not only sensible policy but, in blunt political terms, a signal that progressives backing a Green New Deal recognize the need to revitalize rural areas, where people often feel forgotten by urban legislators and their constituents.

PERENNIAL POLYCULTURES

There has been growing interest in community-supported agriculture, urban farms, and backyard gardening, all of which are components of a healthy food system and healthy communities but do not address the central challenges in the production of the grains (cereals, oilseeds, and pulses) that are the main staples of the human diet. At TLI, Natural Systems Agriculture research focused on perennial polycultures (grain crops grown in mixtures of plants) to replace annual monoculture grain farming offers a model for the long-term commitment to research and outreach necessary for large-scale sustainable agriculture (Crews, et al., 2018).

Annual plants are alive for only part of the year and are weakly rooted even then, which leads to the loss of precious soil, nutrients, and water that perennial plants do a better job of holding. Monoculture approaches in some ways simplify farming, but those fields have only one kind of root architecture, which exacerbates the problem of wasted nutrients and water. Current industrial farming techniques (use of fossil-fuel based fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, with increasingly expensive and complex farm implements) that are dominant in the developed world, and spreading beyond, also are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Less disturbance of soil carbon, in tandem with reduced fossil fuel use in production, reduces the contribution of agriculture to global warming.

Founded in 1976, TLI's long-term research program has developed Kernza, an intermediate wheatgrass now in limited commercial production, and is working on rice, wheat, sorghum, oilseeds, and legumes, in collaborations with people at 16 universities in the United States and in 18 other countries. Through this combination of perennial species in a diverse community of plants, "ecological intensification" can enhance fertility and reduce weeds, pests, and pathogens, supplanting commercial inputs and maintaining food production while reducing the negative environmental impacts of agriculture. Rather than seeing nature as a collection of things to be dominated and controlled, Natural Systems Agriculture takes nature as the standard for good farming practices and seeks to work in a kind of ecological partnership with ecosystems.

A visionary Green New Deal could fund additional research into perennial polycultures and other projects that come under the heading of agro-ecology, an umbrella term for farming that rejects the reliance on the pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers that poison ecosystems all over the world.

REVOLUTION IN THE AIR?

Expanding the number of farmers with the skills needed to leave industrial agriculture behind, and developing crops for a low-energy world are crucial if we are to achieve an ecologically sustainable agriculture. But those changes are of little value without land on which those new farmers can raise those new crops. There is no avoiding the question of land ownership and the need for land reform.

We have no expertise in this area and no specific proposals to offer, but we recognize the importance of the question and the challenge it presents to achieving sustainability in the contemporary United States, as well as around the world. Today, land ownership patterns are at odds with our stated commitment to justice and sustainability—too few people own too much of the agricultural land, and women and people of color are particularly vulnerable to what a Food First report described as, "the disastrous effects of widespread land grabbing and land concentration" (Holt-Giménez, 2014).

In somewhat tamer language, the Farmland Information Center (n.d.), supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, reports what is common knowledge in the countryside: "Finding affordable land for purchase or long-term lease is often cited by beginning and expanding farmers and ranchers as their most significant challenge." Adding to the problem is the loss of farmland to development; in a 2018 report, the American Farmland Trust (2018) reported that almost 31 million acres of agricultural land was "converted" between 1992 and 2012.

No one expects any bill introduced in today's Congress to endorse government action to protect agricultural land from development and redistribute that land to prospective farmers who are currently landless—growing support for democratic socialism does not a revolution make. But any serious long-term planning will have to address land reform, for as the agrarian writer Wendell Berry points out, "There's a fundamental

incompatibility between industrial capitalism and both the ecological and the social principles of good agriculture" (Leonard, 2012).

A vision of rural communities based on family farms is often mistakenly dismissed as mere nostalgia for a romanticized past. We can take stock of the past failures not only of the capitalist farm economy but also of farmers—small family farms are no guarantee of good farming, and rural communities do not guarantee social justice—and still realize that repopulating the countryside is an essential part of a sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

We began with a faith that people with shared values might disagree about strategies yet still work together. People working on a wide variety of other projects—for example, worker/producer/consumer cooperatives and land trusts—can find reasons to support our ideas, just as we support those projects. But we also recognize that real-world proposals have to prioritize, and so we want to be clear about differences.

For example, the Green New Deal resolution calls for "100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources" (House Resolution 109, 2019). One of the key groups backing the plan, the Sunrise Movement, lists this clean-energy goal as one of the three pillars of its program (Dickinson, 2019). We believe that goal is unrealistic. In their current forms, no combination of renewable energy sources can power the United States (Cox, 2017). To talk about renewable energy as a solution without highlighting the need for a dramatic decrease in aggregate consumption in the developed world is disingenuous. Pretending that we can maintain First World affluence and achieve sustainability will lead to failed projects and waste limited resources.

Many advocates of a Green New Deal focus on renewable energy technologies and other technological responses to rapid climate disruption and ecological crises. These

technologies are only part of the solution. We should reject the dominant culture's "technological fundamentalism"—the illusion that high-energy/high-technology can magically produce sustainability at current levels of human population and consumption (Jensen, 2015, p. 120-122). A Green New Deal should support technological innovations, but only those that help us move to a low-energy world in which human flourishing is redefined by improving the quality of relationships rather than seeking to maintain current levels of consumption. Even if today's levels of consumption were not so highly skewed by wealth inequality, we would need to confront the need to dramatically reduce the human drawdown of what we too often cavalierly describe as "natural resources."

A partnership model that rejects the domination/subordination dynamic which is so deeply woven into contemporary U.S. culture is crucial in both economic and ecological analysis. Principles of justice demand that we move beyond our current economic systems, and sustainability goals require us to shift away from our current view of the non-human world as property to be exploited.

We understand that short-term policy proposals must be "reasonable"—that is, they must connect to people's concerns and be articulated in terms that can be widely understood. But they also must help move us toward a system that many today find impossible to imagine: An economy that not only transcends capitalism and its wealth inequality, but also rejects the industrial worldview and its obsession with maximizing production and consumption. Today's policy proposals should advance egalitarian goals for the economy but also embrace an ecological worldview for society, without turning from the difficulty posed by the dramatic changes that lie ahead.

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