



palgrave▶pivot

Post-Capitalist Futures

Paradigms, Politics, and Prospects

Edited by

Samuel Alexander

Sangeetha Chandrashekeran

Brendan Gleeson

palgrave
macmillan



8

Ecofeminist Political Economy: Critical Reflections on the Green New Deal

Christine Bauhardt

Ever since the US Congress's February 2019 resolution initiated by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Green New Deal has been discussed widely, at least in the US and Europe. In December 2019 the European Union also announced a major investment programme called 'European Green Deal' with the goal of reaching zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. Most CO₂ emissions due to carbon combustion are to be avoided; a smaller part of the carbon is to be stored. It is common knowledge that the concept of the Green New Deal harks back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's policy programme from the 1930s which aimed to boost growth and employment after the Great Depression by means of government investments in public infrastructure. Accordingly, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, also considers her 'environmental pact' to be a strategy for economic growth: 'The European Green Deal is our new growth strategy,' she said when presenting her plan for the conversion of industry, technologies, and the financial system.

C. Bauhardt (✉)

Humboldt University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany

e-mail: christine.bauhardt@gender.hu-berlin.de

The United Kingdom put the concept on the agenda as early as 2007, when Caroline Lucas, at the time the only British Member of the European Parliament for the Greens, and others established the Green New Deal Group during the financial crisis. Arguing for a Green New Deal in the UK here and now, she wrote in the *Financial Times* in the summer of 2019: ‘What was needed then—and is needed even more now—is a huge investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency programmes to insulate every building in Britain, a move to a more sustainable farming system, and to bring hope and jobs to communities hollowed out by deindustrialisation.’ (Lucas 2019).

This brief quote highlights the perspective of the Green New Deal which has long been criticised by feminists (cf. Kuhl and Maier 2012; Bauhardt 2014): narrowing the socio-ecological transformation of society to technical innovations and mostly male-dominated sectors, disregarding the underpaid and unpaid care labour performed mostly by women. A Green New Deal is to make public investments in the policy fields of energy, mobility, and building more energy efficient, and in the best case bring about energy savings. Carbon-based fossil fuels are to be replaced by renewables, thus making lifestyles and consumption patterns more sustainable. The idea is that the investments in these areas will generate a large number of new jobs in innovative sectors of the economy. Less innovative, but nonetheless key for discontinuing carbon-based production methods, is the agricultural sector with its high consumption of energy for cultivation, irrigation, and transportation, as well as petroleum-based fertilisers.

The first chapter in Jeremy Rifkin’s most recent book is titled ‘It’s the Infrastructure, Stupid!’ (Rifkin 2019), and it refers solely to technical infrastructures: wind and solar energy for power generation, novel ways of powering vehicles and the expansion of rail services to secure mobility, and improved information and communication technologies to manage and optimise them. It is astonishing how little thought is given to the fact that these areas concern mostly male-dominated jobs, and they are very strongly associated with masculinity in symbolic terms as well (cf. Siemiatycki et al. 2019). The most striking feature is the linkage of technical performance with certain images of masculinity—courageous inventions, control over nature, and competence in dealing with

technical artefacts. But this does not bring people to think critically about what image this 'bold economic plan to save life on Earth'—the muscular subtitle Jeremy Rifkin chose for his book—actually paints. In my mind's eye, it conjures up pictures of pit workers going down into the mines and sweating rail workers toiling to build the great railway systems, except that the dauntless engineers are now wearing suits and their fingernails aren't dirty anymore.

What would be the features of an economy that both recognises that the natural resources are finite and also accommodates feminist calls for more gender justice? Would it suffice to demand more jobs for women in tech, for example, by promoting women in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields? The ecofeminist discussion answers these questions with a clear no. Instead, it raises other questions: which competencies, which kinds of work does a society need to meet human needs? What are the foundations of life and the economy without which a society cannot exist? Neither the market alone nor technical innovations can satisfy needs. Instead, needs are met by women, often invisibly, in the so-called private realm of social reproduction, through generative reproduction as well as shouldering the work of everyday caring and taking responsibility for people who are not yet or are no longer capable of taking care of themselves (cf. as an overview: Bauhardt 2019). Women also bear the burden of a great deal of menial labour in the public sphere, whether it be in agriculture, cleaning, textiles and clothing manufacturing, high-tech component manufacturing, etc.

Ecofeminist Political Economy of Capitalism

Following contemporary analyses of the crises of capitalism—the crisis of overproduction, the banking crisis, the environmental crisis—current voices in feminist economics speak of the crisis of social reproduction. Feminist economists use the term to denote the under-provision of care, which is above all time-consuming and inaccessible to the rationalisation efforts of the capitalist mode of production—and which in principle should not be accessible to rationalisation because of the nature of the reproductive work. Social reproduction work is performed both without

pay in private households and—usually for little pay—via the labour market (including cash-in-hand work). Important characteristics of this work include that it cannot be postponed and that it requires interpersonal empathy and high levels of reliability and commitment. The ‘crisis of social reproduction’ indicates that the expansion of the capitalist logic of exploitation also reshapes care labour through the economic imperative of acceleration, rationalisation, and intensification of work.

Both sides, those providing and those receiving care, perceive the crisis of social reproduction in the overwork and the excessive demands placed on those people responsible for care labour. Under the prevailing circumstances of the gender-hierarchical division of labour, the vast majority of caregivers are women: women perform by far the greatest share of unpaid familial labour, not only caring for children, but also ensuring that males’ labour is available to the labour market, even though the women are gainfully employed themselves. It is also women who take on most of the social reproduction occurring in the sphere of paid labour, be it in raising and teaching children or caring for the sick and the elderly. An often-used way out of being overburdened because of the crisis in care is delegating reproductive labour in one’s own household to migrant women or racialised women—also known as the ‘global care chain’ (Salazar Parreñas 2015). This is a clear sign of the fact that despite a long-standing debate about the gendered division of labour, men have not taken on their share of unpaid work in everyday care labour.

Feminist economists of different schools of thought agree that it is key for the feminist analysis of capitalism to view social reproduction as a realm that is (at least) equivalent to and just as relevant in economic terms as market-based ‘productive gainful employment’—productive because it produces goods and surplus value. From the perspective of the economy overall, investments in social infrastructure—that is, education, care, nursing, etc.—are considered to be consumption expenditure, and unpaid work in private households, to the extent it is viewed as work at all, is considered to be re-productive. These terms and concepts and the premises they involve are the subject of a lively debate among feminists, which I will go into briefly.

The concept of re-production was already contradicted by feminists early on: why should only the manufacture of goods for exchange be

considered ‘productive’, but not the ‘manufacture’ of life and the maintenance of living processes? On further consideration: why is only the processing of nature considered productive, but not nature as such? These questions are the starting point for ecofeminist analysis of the relationships of society to nature under capitalism. This links the ecological criticism of the exploitation and overuse of natural resources with the feminist criticism of the exploitation and societal appropriation of the (unpaid or underpaid) work performed by women in social reproduction (Mellor 1997).

This work is invisible economically, and for this reason it is grossly underestimated because it is work performed by women, which puts it in proximity to nature: because of their potential ability to give birth, women are assumed to be predestined as if ‘by nature’ to care for people who cannot care for themselves. In other words: it is assumed that women are born with competencies for care ‘by nature’ and that they do not need to learn and develop them and thus do not need to be paid. Such competencies are taken for granted—and in fact no society, whether capitalist or not, could survive without women’s social reproduction labour. So, from an ecofeminist perspective, the relationships of society to nature under capitalism are characterised by dual power relations: by subordination and exploitation of nature and of women’s labour which has been declared socially and historically part of nature.

Thus, strategies for an environmentally sound and socially just transition to a post-capitalist era must consider the gendered power relations in human–nature relationships: ‘Central to feminist ecological economics is the normative claim that gender equality should not be achieved at the expense of ecological degradation or the exploitation of nature and other species and that environmental sustainability must not be achieved by exploiting feminised labour’ (Cohen and MacGregor 2020: 8).

The entire economic sector of the care economy, which includes both paid and unpaid labour, is still disregarded in the debates around the Green New Deal. If the care sector were also discussed under the guiding principle of ‘public investments in infrastructure policy’, then the debate would have to be conducted in a completely different way. After all, the expansion of the care infrastructure would also imply a fundamental change in how the economy is organised in a post-fossil society. There

would be a commensurate focus on the overexploitation of women's labour as the overexploitation of the fossil resources. The creation of jobs in social infrastructure would provide secure livelihoods for women and create new ones—for all genders!—and the labour *conditions* in these occupations would have to be discussed.

Ecofeminist Political Economy of the Green New Deal

But what would happen with the unpaid care work in the so-called private households? This is the fundamental weakness of the Green New Deal: it focuses on the public sector of economic activity; the private sphere of people's 'own four walls' and the work performed there are still disregarded, as in the traditional economic debates and theories. So far, the fact that the participation of women in the paid labour markets of industrialised societies has constantly increased in recent years has not resulted in men and women sharing unpaid housework. Since this work must be done, however, private housework and care work have been shifted within middle-class households to migrant women workers. This has been described as the 'global care chain' and is discussed critically from a feminist perspective. From an intersectional perspective of dividing care work into paid and unpaid sectors of economic activity, the Green New Deal is to be viewed especially critically because it is limited to the public realm and leaves the power relations in the private sphere untouched.

The ecofeminist view takes the totality of economic activities for satisfying human needs into account, regardless of whether they are paid or unpaid and whether they are organised in the public or private realms. This permits us to perceive other ways to meet these needs. This perspective also changes the line of vision to be taken by a Green New Deal: departing from the technical-technocratic focus and adopting a way of life and production that does more justice to human beings and most probably also to nature.

What would this mean for the concept of the Green New Deal? The infrastructure policy at the centre of the debate must encompass technical infrastructures as well as social ones. They function according to different logics and follow different ethical orientations. The logic of technical infrastructures is that of rationalisation, acceleration, and subordination of nature. Its orientation is not normative-ethical, but rather functionalist. There is no need to call these logics and orientations ‘masculine’, but they do have some androcentric substance in the sense that they disregard or are wilfully blind to the modes of social reproduction that underpins them.

The social infrastructures for educating children and caring for them and for people who are sick temporarily or long term, or who are old or need long-term care, follow different logics and normative orientations—or at least they should if the work performed there is to be successful. It is the logic and the ethics of care that drive action here, where it is about living beings and not about technical artefacts, where time prosperity is needed instead of acceleration, and where the natural rhythms of growing, becoming, and passing away determine the general course of action. This logic is not necessarily ‘feminine’, either, but seems to reproduce itself time and again following the symbolic order and hierarchy of the gender binary.

Ecofeminist Political Economy Beyond Green Growth

One fundamental problem of the Green New Deal is yet to be discussed. This policy approach is a strategy to promote economic growth, as emphasised by the President of the European Commission, who was quoted at the beginning of this piece: the Green New Deal promotes infrastructures for green growth. This means that it does not question the growth imperative of the capitalist economic order. Indeed, growth is seen as the panacea for the latest iteration of capitalist crisis.

Infrastructure policy seeks to incentivise or develop inputs for capital accumulation that capital is neither willing nor able to provide.

Infrastructures are essential for capitalist societies to function. They are considered the foundation of an economy based on the division of labour: such a foundation is a prerequisite for the production, distribution, and use of goods and services. They are basic material and institutional structures that underpin all economic processes of the valorisation of capital. Making high-performance infrastructures available requires large investments which individual capital is unable to make—and is unwilling to make, since the expected returns cannot be calculated short term or returns cannot be expected in the first place—or benefits are collective rather than individual creating ‘free rider’ concerns for capital. Technical and social infrastructures are characterised by various elements of collectivity. They are financed collectively through the tax system, they require a high degree of collective planning and coordination if they are to fulfil their purpose, and in principle they are available for all to use.

Highly differentiated societies rely on the institutional and material organisation of the division of labour, so it would not be expedient to work politically towards abolishing infrastructure policy. The question arises whether it is possible to imagine an infrastructure policy that is not oriented towards economic growth, but towards sustaining, repairing, and renewing what already exists. In other words, a Green New Deal that neither encourages more of the same capitalist logic of exploitation nor pursues romanticised notions of a pre-industrial and pre-modern world.

Accordingly, my ideas for a Green New Deal with an intersectional and gender-equitable orientation would have to take the needs of social reproduction as their starting point and develop the logics of infrastructure policy following the ethical-normative orientations of social reproduction. The dichotomisation of androcentric-functionalist rationality in the development of technology on the one hand and a care ethic that is implicitly identified as ‘feminine’ on the other must be overcome by an infrastructure policy that places the needs of human beings and their reproductive needs at the centre of its deliberations—without additional and damaging resource consumption and destruction of the ecological foundations of life. Global gender justice and environmental justice do not contradict each other, but rather complement one another if they are conceived of as one.

References

- Bauhardt, Christine. 2014. 'Solutions to the Crisis? The Green New Deal, Degrowth, and the Solidarity Economy: Alternatives to the Capitalist Growth Economy from an Ecofeminist Economics Perspective. *Ecological Economics* 102: 60–68.
- . 2019. Nature, Care and Gender: Feminist Dilemmas. In *Feminist Political Ecology and the Economics of Care: In Search of Economic Alternatives*, Routledge Studies in Ecological Economics, ed. Christine Bauhardt and Wendy Harcourt, 16–35. London: Routledge.
- Cohen, Maeve, and Sherilyn MacGregor. 2020. Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK. A Paper for the WBG Commission on A Gender-Equal Economy. Accessed 12 August 2020. www.wbg.org.uk.
- Kuhl, Mara, in cooperation with Friederike Maier. 2012. The Gender Dimensions of the Green New Deal—An Analysis of Policy Papers of the Greens/EFA New Deal Working Group. Berlin. (Study commissioned by The Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament, initiated by Elisabeth Schroedter).
- Lucas, Caroline. 2019. Britain Needs Its Own Green New Deal: The Country Could be a World Leader in the Clean Energy Revolution. *Financial Times*, 8 June 2019.
- Mellor, Mary. 1997. *Feminism & Ecology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rifkin, Jeremy. 2019. *The Green New Deal: Why the Fossil Fuel Civilization Will Collapse By 2028, and the Bold Economic Plan to Save Life on Earth*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel. 2015. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Siemiatycki, Matti, Theresa Enright, and Mariana Valverde. 2019. The Gendered Production of Infrastructure. *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (2): 297–314.
- The Green New Deal Group. n.d. Accessed 12 August 2020. <https://greennewdealgroup.org/>.

Alternatives and Futures: Cultures, Practices,
Activism and Utopias

Series Editor

Anitra Nelson

Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute

The University of Melbourne

Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Movements such as degrowth, Occupy, solidarity economies, permaculture, low impact living and Via Campesina variously address key issues of the contemporary era such as inequalities of wealth and income, environmental crises, and achieving sustainable cities and production. This series demonstrates the breadth, depth, significance and potential of 'alternatives' in the construction of this century, focusing on the type of future each movement advocates and their strategic agenda.

Alternatives and Futures is of interest to scholars and students across the social sciences and humanities, especially those working in environmental sustainability, politics and policymaking, environmental justice, grassroots governance, heterodox economics and activism.

The series offers a forum for constructive critique and analytical reflection of movements' directions, activism and activists, their assumptions, drivers, aims, visions of alternative futures and actual performance and influence.

More information about this series at
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15864>

Samuel Alexander
Sangeetha Chandrashekeran
Brendan Gleeson
Editors

Post-Capitalist Futures

Paradigms, Politics, and Prospects

palgrave
macmillan