



The Just Transition, Economic Democracy, and the Green New Deal

Two Recent Works Return to the Unfinished Theory and Practice of a Democratic Economy

Evan Casper-Futterman and Jason Spicer

Reviewed: Michael Menser, *We Decide! Theories and Cases in Participatory Democracy*, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Temple University Press, 2018; and Kali Akuno & Ajamu Nangwaya (eds.), *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Recovery and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*, Montreal, Daraja Press, 2017.

Can participatory and economic democracy in the US support a Green New Deal? Evan Casper-Futterman and Jason Spicer review two recent books that assess how radical social and institutional transformation could make a Green New Deal effective, and underscore the challenges that remain.

Earlier this year, US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced a Congressional resolution for a Green New Deal (GND),¹ an idea since supported by a number of 2020 Democratic presidential candidates. The resolution calls for “transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities, labor unions, worker cooperatives, civil-society groups, academia, and businesses.” To some, the reference to worker cooperatives might seem accidental or even strange—how are they central to solving the climate crisis? Two recent books help draw this connection, by taking up the challenges of radical social and institutional transformation to make a GND maximally effective. One outlines the requirements for a maximally participatory democracy, but raises questions about its ideological valences; the other outlines a multilayered effort in one US city, leaving us with questions about organizational capacity to pull off the GND. Inasmuch as these works draw mainly on non-US examples, they magnify the challenges that remain here.

Connecting climate change and the organization of the economy is neither a new nor marginal idea. Many leading thinkers and reformers on these fronts, including Greta Thunberg, Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein, Gar Alperovitz, Gus Speth, and others, have argued the corporate greenwashing approach to sustainability, as has been advanced through profit-maximizing investor-owned firms, is unlikely to end the climate crisis of disaster capitalism, or lead to a “just transition” towards a sustainable, equitable economy. In fact, these very firms generated and profited from the crisis. By contrast, cooperatives and democratic enterprises of all kinds (including housing co-ops, credit unions, and food/consumer cooperatives) exist for a different “logic” than traditional enterprises, as sociologist Joyce Rothschild long ago observed.² These member-owned

¹ See: www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text.

² See: www.jstor.org/stable/2094585.

organizational forms, which according to the late political scientist Robert Dahl best embodied economic democracy, allow us to prioritize the needs of people and planet over profit.

To make the world habitable for the next century, however, will likely mean going beyond firm-level reorganization: simply or mechanistically adding more democratically organized enterprises may be necessary for transformation, but insufficient on its own, if past experience is any guide. For example, large US housing cooperatives developed by unions, many during the original New Deal, ultimately succumbed to the market logic of capitalism, owing to insufficient safeguards and the prevalence of conventional financing, among other reasons. To avoid such a fate, democratic businesses will need to be part of a broader effort that addresses how we fundamentally govern and share power every day. The elements of top-down economic expertise, technocracy, and bureaucracy of the first New Deal, as Sabeel Rahman's work suggests, are unlikely to yield the desired outcome today.

Instead, the GND will need to build on the more transformative parts of the original New Deal, and seek to reconfigure the organizational apparatus of socio-economic and political governance at every scale. Today, the indivisible aims of multiracial social democracy and decarbonization warrant a complete transformation of our community boards and energy utilities and environmental protection agencies, along with the expansion or creation of new public institutions, such as municipal and state public banks (like those newly authorized in California³), and regional economic-development bureaus. Economic democracy at the firm level, as embodied through entities like worker cooperatives, is thus just one of many systemic organizational changes that will need to be deployed from the municipal and regional scales upwards, in order to effect the national goals of the GND.

We Decide! by Michael Menser, and *Jackson Rising*, edited by Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya, both address the challenge of simultaneously rescuing the habitability of our planet, while reorganizing and democratizing production, consumption, surplus allocation, and our organs of self-government. These two volumes add to the emerging conversation on cooperatives, economic democracy and systems change. Both remind us how much remains to be done to make another economy possible.

Drawing on his background in philosophy and business ethics, and a broad range of activism and scholarship on environmental sustainability, solidarity economy, and democratic theory, Menser begins his book with the important task of (re)defining an ideal of democratic principles and practice for a more thoroughly democratic society. From ancient Greece to the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy to the transnational Via Campesina movement, Menser outlines what he calls Maximal Democracy, or MaxD, comprising four principles from which functional democratic practice can guide itself: collective (rather than self-) determination, shared authority, human capacity development, and the connection and proliferation of networks for the furtherance of the preceding values and practices.

Menser reviews an illustrative set of practices that might reconfigure the power dynamics embedded in the relationships of our daily lives. From participatory budgeting to workplace democracy, from anti-consumerist consumption and supply chains to public utilities, the overriding theme is the rearticulation of power relationships between state, markets, and civil society. The movements and organizations Menser profiles are ideologically diverse, and in some cases apolitical. This might make some readers more than a little bit nervous about the implications of these models and practices: if they are ideologically open containers, does this not mean that a variety of political projects might be able to sabotage and co-opt them for other ends? This is a legitimate concern, and one that we share. The adoption of certain organizational practices, such as those featured in this book, will be necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve deep systems change. While they enable the expression of more deeply democratic values, they ultimately reflect and animate the political and socio-economic values participants bring to them.

³ See: www.latimes.com/business/story/2019-10-02/public-banks-can-be-formed-under-bill-signed-by-newsom.

By way of conclusion, Menser identifies a few core “best practices” for the sustainable stewardship of MaxD at a scale of impact beyond the outcomes for its participants. These are: a bank or financing entity, a university or research arm, a nongovernmental coordinating entity, and a strong multi-issue social movement base. One can certainly debate about whether these four are the only shared elements, or suggest add-ons for any given locality, but it would be difficult to dispute the value that these four elements bring, regardless of the specificities of place or ideology. In the actual doing of the work on the ground, however, the specificities of place and ideology take on significantly greater importance.

For those in search of an ideologically coherent and applied vision of Menser’s MaxD formulation, *Jackson Rising* is a useful complement. The diverse array of municipal and regional institutions necessary for the promulgation of a successful Green New Deal is further elaborated here, as various authors in the edited work give a 360-degree view of efforts to create a sustainable, just transition in Jackson, Mississippi. In the book’s preface, the long, violent shadow of racialized capitalism and the historical struggle for land and freedom is brought into searing relief by Rukia Lumumba, widow of deceased revolutionary Chokwe Lumumba, who was elected Jackson’s mayor in 2013 and passed away after only a few months in office. In the subsequent chapters, Akuno and others outline the political vision and program of Cooperation Jackson and the Jackson–Kush Plan.⁴

The sweeping scope and language of the book contrasts sharply with its reporting of the realities of inch-by-inch progress and setbacks on the ground in Jackson, and places this volume in a lineage of political manifestos like the Black Panther Party platform and program, and the 13-point program of the Young Lords. Similarly, the volume’s most theoretically and programmatically comprehensive sections are those addressing the large-scale visions for cooperative development incubators, digital fabrication, community land trusts, gardening, food production and eco-villages, as well as people’s assemblies and a human-rights charter for the city.

Notably, both of these works consider the issue of gender in economic democracy. Far too often, the role gender plays in the work of participatory institutions and collective governance is relegated to footnote status, or treated separately. In Menser’s work, the analysis of Seikatsu, the multipurpose cooperative conglomerate enterprise run and managed mostly by women, is theoretically bolstered with a review of the frameworks from the environmental justice and subsistence perspectives (explicitly building on the work of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, among others). In *Jackson Rising*, a reprinted interview with Saki Hall⁵ frames the solidarity economy as an extension of the household and care labor that has always disproportionately fallen to women. Nonetheless, the Hall contribution remains somewhat disconnected from the programmatic chapters that often take the main stage in the book.

While the question of who actually leads and sustains the democratic practices and institutions featured in both of these works (the answer: it’s mostly women) is thus considered, it remains a secondary concern. We get little sense of what might be required to move from the male-dominated world of disaster capitalism to a feminist just transition, as the GND’s erstwhile chief sponsor, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez, continues to be dismissed and derided by her critics in highly troubling, gendered ways. The co-authors of the present article, meanwhile, are men, as are the authors and primary editors of the two works discussed throughout—another reminder of how central and deep gender inequality remains in today’s economy.

These two works are also notable for what they fail to feature, namely a significant number of other US case studies or practices. This is not so much a weakness of the works or their authors, as much as a reflection of a limited set of successes from which to draw on in the US context. *Jackson Rising* chronicles a strong vision. But like many of its peer projects across the country, the reality is that very little of the democratically managed infrastructure it describes and envisions functionally

⁴ See: www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/kaliakuno_jackson_web.pdf.

⁵ See: <https://atlantablackstar.com/2017/10/16/jackson-rising-saki-hall-cooperation-jackson-intersection-gender-economics>.

exists on the ground. Meanwhile, though Menser's work is replete with exciting examples, few are from the US.

This leaves both US activists and scholars with something to ponder: has the US movement for a participatory and democratic economy built sufficiently robust regional or municipal coordinating institutions to serve these four functions that Menser concludes are so critical? If not, one wonders about existing capacity to implement a multiscalar GND. Is it at risk of becoming the latest in a long line of movements whose success at issue framing has run ahead of its ability to mobilize resources and effect change? Without the regional and municipal coordinating capacity, do we risk repeating the top-down technocratic, bureaucratic, not-so-New Deal of a century ago? In so doing, we might ensure our short-term survival, but to paraphrase the Knights of Labor from the 19th century, "something of slavery"⁶ will still remain with us, and "something of freedom" will still be yet to come.

Beyond federal legislation and action, the fight for a just transition and for economic democracy in the US will hinge on the strength of place-based networks and regimes like those outlined in these two books. While the GND cannot create these networks and practices, it can provide a policy framework to enable their successful development.

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To cite this article:

Evan Casper-Futterman and Jason Spicer, "The Just Transition, Economic Democracy, and the Green New Deal. Two Recent Works Return to the Unfinished Theory and Practice of a Democratic Economy", *Metropolitiques*, 5 November 2019. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Just-Transition-Economic-Democracy-and-the-Green-New-Deal.html>.

⁶ See: www.jacobinmag.com/2013/02/wage-slavery-and-republican-liberty.