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TO ASSEMBLE SOCIETY ANEW?

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONTEMPORARY INITIATIVES OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

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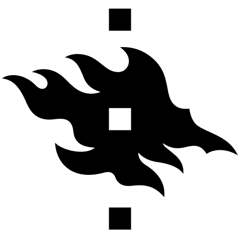

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TO ASSEMBLE SOCIETY ANEW? THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONTEMPORARY INITIATIVES OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Recently, there have emerged several holistic initiatives aiming for comprehensive socio-ecological change. In this paper, I analyse the political economy of four recent plans falling under the rubric of a "Green New Deal", which, while sharing many similarities, are examples of four distinct approaches to socio-ecological change. Crucial differences concern the proposals' future-oriented narratives, their position on growth, democracy, technology, how to finance the changes and the relations between socio-economic, political and environmental questions. Although there exists a relatively extensive consensus on the necessity of wide-ranging change, the differences identified illustrate the disagreements that persist on the scale, scope, and purpose of the change, on how to come about with the transformation and whose agency matters in this process. I argue that the plans, by emphasising strategy at the expense of an analytical perspective, may run the risk of becoming blind both to the contradictions innate in their approaches and the gaps that, during a conjuncture of historical crises and a world of increasing environmental degradation and social hardship, might be opening for more ambitious changes.

Keywords: socio-ecological transformation, political economy, socio-ecological crises, Green New Deal

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly acknowledged that the environmental breakdown and social suffering we are facing, from climate change and the loss of biodiversity to astounding inequalities are best not tackled in a fragmentary fashion (Brand, Görg, Wissen 2020, 161–162). The environment, the economy and politics are inseparably intertwined. Dealing with mounting issues such as global warming, then, cannot be undertaken separately from the rest of the society and its modes of production, consumption and accumulation. For long, however, the Overton window for ambitious change remained firmly closed, as the political backdrop was dominated by market solutions, pricing mechanisms and

technological fixes. Recently, that window has flung wide open, or at any rate, opened up to let in fresh air for novel ideas. Most evidently, the COVID-19 pandemic has once again proven that confronting major crises require public and collective, not private and individual solutions, as states have stepped in to prevent even more devastating health and socioeconomic disasters. Several policy choices previously deemed inconceivable by many, such as large-scale fiscal interventions at the cost of balanced budgets, have again been proven both possible and necessary.

The landscape, however, was shifting already before. In 2019, several holistic initiatives were put forward as the means for overcoming contemporary socio-ecological challenges and for moving towards post-fossil fuel societies. Here, I will analyse four such plans, loosely falling under the general rubric of a "Green New Deal" (GND). The European Commission presented the European Green Deal (EGD) in December (European Commission 2019), while earlier in 2019, the US Congress Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced a Resolution for a Green New Deal (RGND) (Ocasio-Cortez 2019), gaining widespread attention and interest. Both included GND as a core part of their platform for re-election in the autumn of 2020. In the autumn of 2019, the GND for Europe campaign presented a "Blueprint for Europe's Just Transition" (EJT) (The GND for Europe 2019), while in Finland the BIOS Research Unit, which focuses on socio-ecological changes and has, for example, contributed to the work on UN's Global Sustainable Development Report of 2019 (Järvensivu et al. 2018) has advocated for a plan of Ecological Reconstruction (ER) (BIOS Research Unit 2019). Numerous other actors, such as the South Korean government (Farand 2020) and the public intellectual and scholar Noam Chomsky together with the economist Robert Pollin (Chomsky & Pollin 2020) have more recently pushed for their particular blueprints for change under the same framing.

Even if the pandemic and the subsequent socioeconomic insecurity has altered the political landscape, it has not made a socio-ecological transformation less urgent. [1] The pandemic was anything but an unforeseen event or an "exogenous shock", but a widely anticipated consequence of increasing human activity, extraction, and global interdependence (UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Livestock Research Institute 2020). Moreover, the Great Lockdown presented us with further evidence of

1 The required changes for a truly sustainable world have been increasingly discussed within the framework of "transformation", be it "socio-ecological" or otherwise. Following Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, I define socio-ecological transformation here as the political, socioeconomic and cultural changes resulting from the attempts "to address the socioecological crisis". (Brand & Wissen 2017, 6260). Here, because the analysis focuses on contemporary political-strategic initiatives, it is not possible to consider the differences of various academic perspectives to transformations in detail. For good overviews see Brand & Wissen 2017; Görg et al. 2017; Blythe et al. 2018. Most likely, often the inspiration for the transformation framing is the political economist Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi 1944/2001; for a Polanyian perspective on socio-ecological transformation see Brand, Görg, Wissen 2020).

the magnitude of change required to tackle climate change (Le Quéré et al. 2020; Forster et al. 2020). As societies have tried to envisage pathways out of the predicament initiated by the pandemic, the historical analogies that the aforementioned plans utilised already before – from post-Great Depression US New Deal socioeconomic programs to post-World War II reconstruction – have become ever more pertinent. Indeed, such comparisons have been employed in the calls for recovery (see, e.g., Partington 2020).[2] Undeniably, the routes taken and the path dependencies that develop are of utmost importance to the world's long-term future (Forster et al. 2020).

Hence, even if our spaces of experience and horizons of expectation (Koselleck 2004, 255-277) are certainly different from what they were at the close of the 2010s, it is worthwhile to consider what sort of change do the above-mentioned four initiatives (EGD, RGND, EJT, ER. For a recap and clarification of the abbreviations used, see Table 1.) envisage. To some extent, the proposals share an understanding of the scale of measures required to tackle the environmental problems of the 21st century. They all agree – albeit with different timeframes, solutions and emphasises in mind – that decarbonisation is required and that the multitude of other environmental breakdowns require addressing just as urgently. The initiatives also recognise that these goals demand profound changes in key areas from energy to transport and from agriculture to industry. But such plans are never *simply* environmental programs (Harvey 1993, 25), and despite similarities, they vary a great deal.

In what follows, I aim to highlight the initiatives' differences and commonalities. The emphasis is on the big picture: how do the plans differ in terms of their guiding politico-economic frameworks? What stories do they tell of the times ahead? Which scales of change do the proposals consider vital for the transformation? Which actors are deemed crucial and how do they come about with the change? Epistemologically, such a level of analysis is not entirely straightforward. First of all, crucial is not only what is proposed but also what is not. Moreover, not only have the proposals been put forth by very different types of actors, but the GND framing is a site of contestation in itself (see, e.g., Heenan & Sturman 2020), and there is a risk of projecting one's past understanding on the plans. In addition, the initiatives – some long and detailed, others brief and concise – overlap in many respects. However, they differ in fundamental ways on their emphasis on and framing of key issues and are illustrations of four distinct contemporary approaches to socio-ecological change. The future-oriented narratives of the plans are good examples of both the divergence and convergence.

2 On the relations between the New Deal and the GND and the present conjunctures similarities to the 1930s, see Dale forthcoming.

Table 1. An explanation of the abbrevations used of the four initiatives under examination in this paper.

EGD	EJT	ER	RGND
European Green Deal, an initiative put forward by the European Commission in December 2019.	A Blueprint for Europe's Just Transition, a plan presented by the Green New Deal for Europe campaign in December 2019.	Ecological Reconstruction, a plan presented by the BIOS Research Unit in November 2019.	United States House Resolution (109) for a Green New Deal, introduced by the Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in February 2019.

THE STORIES WE TELL

Future-oriented narratives are potent tools in mobilising and orienting citizens and organisations towards common objectives (Mayer 2014; Davis 2012). Merely prescribing policy measures for environmental sustainability is not sufficient for bringing about the change needed. A narrative and a guiding vision provide a preview of the future we can beget. In other words, as proposals of transformation and change, the plans discussed here aim to mould the terrain of various possible futures; to "occupy the absent continent of the future" (Rilling 2014, 32).[3] Arguably it is these very qualities that make the aforementioned and similar plans for change appealing: they emphasise the gravity of the task at hand, muster collective will and frame the discussion in novel terms under a comprehensive agenda. Nonetheless, even if the stories begin from the same starting point of transforming our societies to a sustainable foundation, they take somewhat different pathways from here on after.

Certainly, the novelty of many of the recent narratives is pinpointing the linkages between environmental troubles and socioeconomic ills. The first GND proposals emerged a little over a decade ago in the aftermath of the Great Recession (UNEP 2009; Green New Deal Group 2008). To be sure, there are plenty of similarities between that and the present conjuncture, even if the politico-ideological context has altered profoundly. Then just as now, the state and public expenditure were called upon to rescue and similarly to the contemporary public debate, many were calling for a "green recovery" out of the recession (Mann & Wainwright 2018, 109). Some of these initiatives, however, had a distinctive emphasis on technological solutions and ecological modernisation (Galvin & Healy 2020; Feindt & Cowell 2010).

Contrary to such a techno-optimistic perspective, at the core of the RGND, for example, is the demand to simultaneously tackle decarbonisation, ecological degradation, inequality and poverty, and the assurance that the environment *can* be protected while providing socioeconomic security and well-being. It is a story that considers the deprivation of nature part-and-parcel of a more general exploitative arrangement and one

3 Translation from German by Ulrich Brand (Brand 2016a, 518).

that deems addressing both environmental and social distress as a necessity for a thriving world. To do this and to reorganise the US economy for a post-fossil fuel future, the resolution calls for a collective project: a 10-year society-wide mobilisation, invoking the historical example of president Roosevelt's New Deal and World War II economic mobilisations. The post-2008 calls for a green recovery or a GND never truly materialised (Mann & Wainwright 2018, 114-115). Whether the contemporary appeals will, remains to be seen.

The focal narratives offered by the EJT are similar, but with key additions and more forthright phrasing. To the twin crisis of environment and social hardship, the EJT adds a third one: democracy. Here, the culprit for the triple calamity is unambiguously identified as Europe's prevailing and disenfranchising politico-economic order and its orientation to "ever-increasing production and consumption", growth and austerity politics. The blueprint is posited as a remedy for this arrangement; as a plan for a structural transformation that enables a non-extractive and democratic economy focused on environmental sustainability and socially valuable undertakings. Here too, the positive-sum nature of the transformation is emphasised: workers and communities of Europe will benefit from the change in stability, employment and health.

Whereas questions of distribution and alleviating social distress are essential to the stories told by the RGND and EJT, the narrative provided by the EGD is somewhat different. Notwithstanding mentions to inclusivity, just transition and energy poverty, it does not similarly incorporate socioeconomic matters to climate and environmental challenges, which the plan considers as "this generation's defining task". Rather, politico-economically the EU Commission has framed the initiative first and foremost as a novel economic growth strategy aiming to "transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society" with a "resource-efficient and competitive economy". In a nutshell then, if the others emphasise a win-win situation between social well-being and environmental protection, the EGD considers there to be one between the latter and growth, correspondingly not only to the post-Great Recession GND proposals but also to the "green economy" and other similar plans put forward in the early 2010s by international organizations (Brand & Wissen 2017, 6260-6262).

The story of BIOS's plan for an ER strikes yet a different note. It certainly envisions a distinctive future from EU's plans, but it also diverges from the two others. The narrative is not inattentive to the linkages of environmental and socioeconomic matters and ensuring a just distribution of both the "benefits of reconstruction" and the "costs of continuing environmental … degradation" is considered important. However, it can be argued that tackling socioeconomic disparities are not at the crux of the narrative. Rather, the kernel of the vision is a future of meaningful and better lives, with less material consumption and extraction of natural resources and more environmental culti-

vation. A society where basic material needs are fulfilled, and citizens can enjoy more care, culture and stability. Moreover, if the RGND and the EJT draw historically not only from the New Deal programs but also from the state-led economy of the Second World War, ER deems the undemocratic character of war economy as an inapt analogy and rather compares the task ahead to Europe's post-war multi-decade rebuilding. One could ask, do not also the devastation of the war and the destructive military technologies it brought about make the analogy undesirable?

LET JUSTICE REIGN?

An important question begs to be answered: for what reasons do some of the initiatives interweave social and environmental issues tightly together? Why inequalities or democracy should be at the core of a shift towards environmental sustainability? As Galvin and Healy, for example, have pointed out, there are both normative arguments and pragmatic reasons for this claim (Galvin & Healy 2020). Not only are wealthy individuals (Wiedmann et al. 2020; Chancel & Piketty 2015) and large companies responsible for the great part of carbon emissions (Taylor & Watts 2019; Ekwurzel et al. 2017) and negative environmental impact more broadly (Teixidó-Figueras et al. 2016), but there is also evidence that unequal societies consume and emit more (Knight, Schor, Jorgenson 2017).

As ER, RGND and EJT strongly emphasise, the have-nots are the least responsible for exacerbating ecological disasters, yet they are most affected by them. Unsurprisingly, this also holds true globally, as wealthy countries of the Global North are and have been accountable for the largest part of emissions (UNEP 2019), yet those in the Global South are often most at the mercy of environmental disasters, as the north externalises the socio-ecological burden of its standard of living (Lessenich 2019; Dorninger et al. 2020).[4] Indeed, at the heart of all three proposals is also that the US, Finland, and Europe – wealthy and capable countries in general – have the greatest responsibility in taking the lead in decarbonisation.[5]

Some of the initiatives also examine in more detail the questions relating to global economic institutions and inter-state politics. Here, there is unfortunately not sufficient space to consider these thoroughly. Suffice to say, the policies range from the somewhat general proposals of the RGND to enact trade rules with strong environmental and labour protection standards and the EU's calls for "green diplomacy" to the more

4 The EGD has been criticised exactly for such externalization of environmental burdens. See Fuchs, Brown, Rounsevell 2020.

5 For an overview of the normative theoretical arguments outlining the reasoning for the responsibilities of the Global North, see, e.g., Roberts & Parks 2007, 133-152.

thorough institutional reform proposals of the EJT. Even if others have put forward plans for recalibrating the international economic order to support a "Global" or an "International" GND (see, e.g., Gallagher & Kozul-Wright 2019; Mann, Riofrancos, Adler 2020), the nexus of the global economic architecture and wide-scale socio-ecological change remains a relatively underdeveloped area. The RGND, for instance, has been both criticised for its nationalistic approach and defended against these assessments (Tucker 2019).

Then there is the pragmatics. Wide disparities in wealth and power make both inter-state (Roberts & Parks 2007, 135–137) and intra-state cooperation a difficult endeavour. While the EGD does not explicitly combine the social with the environmental, the strategic benefits of this linkage – the fact that climate austerity garners very little support – is not lost for the EU. If the disadvantaged have plenty to gain from a managed transition, their stronger dependence on fossil-fuels (a larger proportion of their income is spent on carbon-heavy necessities) also means they have the most to lose. As France's *gilets jaunes* or Ecuador's protests against the end of fossil fuel subsidies (Monahan 2019) have demonstrated, if environmental reforms are to have political impetus, or if they are to avoid social unrest and hardship in the first place, what is taken ought to be compensated. Pitting social well-being against the environment or employment against the climate does not spark momentum.

The Just Transition Fund of the EGD intends to address this dilemma by providing compensation for regions most affected by the change. Originally, the fund was criticised for lacking both in size and scope, as it was to provide only 7.5 billion of fresh money – a number deemed entirely inadequate (Cameron et al. 2020). The Commission aimed to place the fund at the centre of its pandemic recovery plans by proposing to increase the amount to 40 billion euros and demanding member-states to commit to climate neutrality to access the fund (European Commission 2020). In the diluted compromise deal agreed by the European Council, however, the amount was reduced to 17.5 billion euros and the strict conditionality for funding was changed to a reduction of funds available to countries not committing to the 2050 climate neutrality target (Council of the European Union 2020). We will return to the subject of financing below but let us first consider what the plans aim to achieve, how they aim to do it, and whose agency matters in this process. An outline of the differences of the plans' politico-economic frameworks can be found in the table below (Table 2).

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The differences and similarities observable in the guiding narratives come clearer when we examine the nuts and bolts of the initiatives. Consider the objectives of ER. In the

aggregate, the vital objective is to orient economic activity to function within the material limits of the planet, embed the economy to socio-ecologically valuable goals and to decarbonize Finland within the next decade or so. Simultaneously, societies ought to become more resilient to tackle future crises and increasingly appreciate materially less burdensome activities such as care and arts. In the case of the RGND, the fundamental objectives are clearly laid out, even if they are fairly loose: global net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, addressing inequalities, providing new good employment for millions of US citizens and basic necessities such as clean water and healthcare for all while reconstructing the country's infrastructure to a sustainable foundation.

The EGD plans for a different kind of change. One of the most crucial disparities continues to concern growth: whereas the EJT wishes to "decouple human flourishing from GDP growth" and BIOS's ER emphasises the deficiency of abstract quantitative measurements such as GDP to our prospering, the EGD explicitly and above all aims to separate growth from environmental deprivation and the use of natural resources. As mentioned, such a view on the complementary relationship between GDP growth and environmental protection, or indeed between GDP growth and "progress" more broadly, has been the dominant position in economic thinking (see, e.g., Barry 2020; Schmelzer 2016), even if little empirical proof has been forthcoming for the absolute decoupling of growth from environmental burdens (Hickel & Kallis 2020).

This expansive objective also explains the EGD's further focus on matters such as (energy) efficiency. Indeed, a key difference between ER and EJT on the one hand, and EGD and RGND (which says nothing on growth explicitly) on the other, is that while the latter mainly target extending the use of renewables or increasing efficiency, the former also aim to reduce the overall use of natural resources to fit "planetary boundaries" (Steffen et al. 2015). The former also have the most detailed discussions on the material limits of our activities. The method of both reducing energy demand and increasing efficiency is supported by recent research, which illustrates that historically this has been the pathway for decreasing emissions (Le Quéré et al. 2019). Focusing on both supply and demand is crucial also because utilising renewables does not mean ending the extraction of material resources. Many renewable energy sources necessitate electrical components, which in turn require minerals such as lithium – resources often found in the Global South and areas where communities are already in a vulnerable situation. Excessive extraction to answer increasing demand risks intensifying their hardship (Aronoff et al. 2019, 139-146).

Which tools are to be utilised in reaching these objectives? There is considerable overlap between the plans instrument-wise. For example, all consider innovation and education policies central and many have precise objectives and policy recommendations for sectoral transitions, spanning from heating and the forest sector to water sys-

tems, agriculture and transportation. But divergent politico-economic characteristics are once again obvious, possibly most clearly in the case of the EJT. The entire blueprint is formulated around the establishment of three novel institutions carrying out the transformation: an “Environmental Union”, an “Environmental Justice Commission” and a “Green Public Works”. The first would constitute a binding legislative framework, embedding the change in law and tackling both the social and the environmental side. The legislation proposed is numerous and cover many a different sector, comprising of broad demands such as legislation for shutting down tax havens, of mandating economies to function within the limits of the planet or criminalising climate damage, but also of more specific regulatory measures on banning the production of fossil-fuel vehicles, electrifying railways or formulating a punitive framework for non-sustainable investments. The purpose of the Justice Commission would be to scrutinise that the change would be undertaken justly and appropriately.

The third institution, the Green Public Works, is presented as the framework for channelling the required public investments. Public investment is important for all of the plans, but differences continue. The EGD, functioning within the existing restricting macroeconomic policy framework of the EU as it is (see, e.g., Stockhammer & Köhler 2015; Ryner 2015), to a large extent counts on leveraging private investments to achieve its objectives. Public investments are emphasised by the others not only as they permit a more active role and steering by governments, but also because they enable long-term investments to projects supporting environmental and social purposes, which private actors often deem either too risky, requiring too long a commitment or to be insufficiently profitable (Mazzucato 2015, 148-152). The EGD aims to address these concerns by providing a taxonomy for sustainable activities and developing the transparency and trustworthiness standards of investments.

Given the above discussion, it is unsurprising that there are few social policies included in the EGD, whereas especially the RGND and EJT outline a number of them ranging from providing a living for non-paid domestic and care work through a care income to improving the bargaining power of labour, shortening working hours and tackling monopolies. An important distinction between the RGND, EJT and ER can be illustrated through the example of a job guarantee, which all three initiatives posit as a key instrument. To simplify considerably, a job guarantee constitutes of the government employing all who are willing to work, and the idea has become widely discussed in light of the vast current unemployment levels (for a recent articulation of the job guarantee see Tcherneva 2020). While especially in the RGND it is mainly framed as a way to address socioeconomic troubles, in the ER it is primarily presented as a means for a qualitative change in the sustainability of work carried out; an assurance that ecologically sustainable employment will exist even if one turns down an opportunity from

Table 2. Divergent politico-economic frameworks to socio-ecological change

Initiative	**European Green Deal (EGD)** European Commission	**Blueprint for Europe's Just Transition (EJT)** Green New Deal for Europe	**Ecological Reconstruction (ER)** BIOS Research Unit	**Resolution for a Green New Deal (RGND)** Ocasio-Cortez & Markey et al.
Meta-approach	Rationalist liberalism; green growth, decoupling possible	Non-reformist reforms; a-growth, decoupling most likely not possible	Radical reformism; a-growth, decoupling most likely not possible	Green Keynesianism; a-growth, decoupling possible
Strategic Logic	n/a	Antagonistic & confrontational to ruling elite	Collaborative & consensus-oriented; pragmatic	Conciliatory w/ focus on "frontline communities"
Modes of Change	Top-down; technocratic; incremental	Bottom-up & top down; political; discontinuous	Top-down; political; discontinuous	Top-down & bottom-up; political; incremental
Primary Scales of Change	Material; legislative; technological	Institutional; legislative; grassroots; systemic	Material; cultural; systemic	Material
Key Actors	EU + member states	Local and regional communities; grassroots organisations + EU	State/government to compose collective objectives & orchestrate action + other actors towards this goal	Federal government + local communities, workers, civil society, academia, business
Key Objectives	Growth decoupled from environmental degradation and the excessive use of natural resources; EU net-zero GHG emissions 2050; efficiency; circular economy + detailed sectoral objectives	Decouple social flourishing from environmental breakdown and GDP growth; reduce total material and energy usage; address EU's democratic deficits; GND to form a social movement + detailed sectoral objectives	Economy embedded to society and ecological material boundaries; Finland net-zero GHG emissions 2030-2035; reduce total material and energy usage; growing emphasis on care and culture; socio-ecological resilience + detailed sectoral objectives	Global net-zero GHG emissions 2050; millions new high-quality jobs; justice & equity for "frontline and vulnerable communities"; basic material needs provided (e.g. clean & healthy air, water, food and nature; healthcare); sustainable infrastructure
Key Instruments	Price mechanisms; public-private investments; regulation; technological progress & digitalisation; mission-oriented innovation + detailed sectoral transition policies	Institutional reform & grassroots activism; public investment; regulation; "green job guarantee"; economic democracy; care income & other social policies + detailed sectoral transition policies	Public investments; price mechanisms; mission-oriented innovation; "green job guarantee"; education policies + detailed sectorial transition policies	Public investments to community-defined large-scale projects (e.g. sustainable building construction; expanding renewable energy usage; restoring ecosystems) + social policies (e.g. job guarantee; enhanced labour standards; education & training; R&D)
Fiscal and Monetary Policy	Pre-COVID-19: Stability & Growth Pact (SGP) as a framework: monetarism & tight fiscal constraints → inducing private investment via public money Mid-COVID-19 economic crisis: SGP rules suspended, tentative common fiscal architechture, larger role for public investments Post-COVID-19: ???	Financing via green bonds issued by public banks & backed by ECB to bypass SGP rules; ECB sovereign currency issuer → constraints inflation and real resources not monetary; balanced budgets not an inherent objective; ECB mandate reformed to take social and environmental issues into account	Finland not a sovereign currency issuer → eurozone central: nationally promote reforms to facilitate public investment (SGP rules; ECB mandate): if political consensus in EU then constraints not monetary but real and inflationary; without reform → breaking SGP rules / reforms supporting market incentives & moderate increase in deficit spending	Keynesian demand-focused macroeconomic policy: emphasis on public investment and stimulus; no explicit detailed stances in resolution; afiliated groups: US sovereign currency issuer → constraints real and inflationary not monetary

The table provides an approximate outline of the most relevant differences between the approaches. In many aspects the initiatives overlap with each other.

Exxon. The EJT emphasises the importance of this aspect likewise, but also strongly underlines the benefits that such a guarantee has for workers, in combination with other policy measures that strengthen the position of labour.

Indeed, a job guarantee brings to light how unemployment is always a fundamentally political question, and it could form a solid basis for the decommodification of human labour (Grey 2017). Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that the ramifications of a job guarantee, depending on not only of what sort of employment it provides but also all other practical details, would be complex and significant for, *inter alia*, welfare state programs, inflation, and the distribution of power between employers and workers (for critiques, see Bruenig 2020; Hiscox 2020), being also naturally contingent on the given historical, societal and institutional context and existing policy measures.

Indeed, if one considers a job guarantee from the perspective of power, if an assurance for employment may intuitively seem to increase the power of labour as the threat of unemployment disappears, it would seem to be possible that without a careful consideration of the guarantee's internal mechanisms and its importance in relation to other policies, a guarantee can hinder the bargaining power of workers – which has already declined severely in recent decades (Piketty 2020, 530-533, 641; Lavoie & Stockhammer 2013) – if the wages of the jobs under the guarantee are set by the government as the minimum-wage level, without the possibility to collectively negotiate them upwards, not only denying the prospect for bargaining, but also possibly allowing for employers to use it as a leverage for keeping wages low (Hiscox 2020). More detailed considerations are beyond the scope of this paper, but the above is hopefully sufficient to highlight the complicated political aspects that the "general idea" of a job guarantee has.

A further central difference concerns the weight put on price mechanisms. The EGD underlines them the most, aiming for a consistent pricing policy across-the-board, considering also the possibility of extending the European Emissions Trading System and of proposing a carbon tariff for imports. ER deems both of these instruments, in combination with other tools such as the ones mentioned above, as important parts of the transformation toolset, while the EJT holds the current cap-and-trade model of emission quotas as insufficient and proposes a fee-and-dividend price system – imposing a progressive levy that focuses on the heaviest emitters and directing the funds to public use – as its replacement. Another important disparity concerns the plan's positions on technological development, be it industrial technology or digitalisation: in EU's plans progress in areas such as cloud and edge computing, "clean steel breakthrough technologies", or 5G hold a vital position, whereas the other initiatives are either agnostic or consider technological advancement to be of second-order in importance.

DEMOCRACY AGAINST THE ENVIRONMENT?

Finally, there is the question of whose agency matters. Will the transformation be a bottom-up or a top-down process? During the past few centuries, democracy – according to the historian Timothy Mitchell – developed tightly knit with the materially boundless image of the future provided by fossil fuels (Mitchell 2011). It is not uncommon that democracy, or at least existing democratic practices, are posited as major obstacles in tackling climate change and other environmental issues (see, e.g., Blühdorn 2020; Jamieson 2020). Against this view, RGND, EJT and ER assert that democracy has to be at the heart of the transformation, not only for its intrinsic value but also since socio-ecological change must be enfranchising and legitimate if it wishes to succeed.

The EGD agrees on the importance of participation. But in addition, it does relatively little to consider the subject of democracy. True, the EU Commission is planning to put forward a Climate Pact to "engage the public" in late 2020. As of October 2020, there are relatively few details on the nature of the pact. All the same, given the well-known democratic gaps of the EU and the Commission in the first place (see, e.g., Mair 2013, chapter 4), to consider the EGD as a technocratic blueprint to free the continent of fossil fuels and make it environmentally sustainable is not hyperbole. In fact, the EGD does not refer to democracy once. Contrary to this, ER stresses that democratic processes must be protected and improved, and the RGND underscores that local "frontline and vulnerable communities" and civil society in general must be actively involved in the mobilisation. Especially in the former, however, the emphasis seems to be situated solely within the confines of existing electoral democracy: parliamentary government will coordinate the overarching objectives and steer society toward these goals. Indeed, even if it is stressed that the reconstruction cannot materialise merely top-down, there are few tools provided for bottom-up social endeavours.

The EJT outlines such tools, unsurprisingly, given that it aims for a social movement that would simultaneously both "capture the current system" and "dismantle" and "replace it", namely a movement both pressing EU decision-makers and enabling local agency. Furthermore, as mentioned, the EJT identifies democracy as the third horn of the interconnected crises, pointing especially towards the EU's democratic shortfalls. In addition to the EU's general legitimacy gaps, in the context of climate politics, the concern is that fossil fuel companies utilise their power to undermine democratic practices and sway decisions in their favour (Laville 2019). To tackle these problems, the plan proposes precise institutional reforms: local "People's Assemblies" of deliberative democracy to have a say where the resources are allocated and a "Green Solidarity Network" between communities.

However, the general goal of the blueprint is not to merely rein in powerful corporations or increase the input of citizens in decision-making but also a comprehensive change in the distribution of economic power. In other words, economic democracy. Here, too, EJT arguably differs distinctly from the other initiatives. True, ER underlines that as public long-term investment takes a central role in the next 30 years, a greater part of economic policies will take place within the scope of democratic processes, and the RGND suggests increasing "ownership stakes and returns on investment" and refers to worker cooperatives. But new forms of ownership and democracy are central to the EJT, and the plan promotes investments to cooperatives and proposes an "Economic Democracy Directive" to ensure workers have adequate representation, shares and power within companies.

There is indeed a powerful argument to be made for the case that if we are to pursue socio-ecologically valuable economic objectives in place of prioritising profit, then we must do away with counting on the market and instil our economic activities within the domain of democratic decision-making and collective ownership; to take into account the *materiality* of democracy and expand the public sphere from mere participation or dialogue to the democratic control of production and consumption (see, e.g., Pichler, Brand, Görg 2020; Hägglund 2019, 294-300). This is what the EJT aims for, and the position outlined in the blueprint, but also, even if perhaps to a lesser extent, the positions of ER and RGND likewise, is a "wager that more democracy, rather than less, is the way to tackle climate change", to borrow a phrase from the scholars Alyssa Battistoni and Jedediah Britton-Purdy (Battistoni & Britton-Purdy 2020, 57); it is an attempt to transcend carbon democracy.

HOW TO PAY FOR A THRIVING PLANET?

Economic democracy is undoubtedly linked to the more general question of economic policy. However, it is also evidently separate from the question of financing the transformation to begin with. Here too we find both opposing views and common ground. The EGD, as an initiative under implementation, differs from the others and has been affected greatly by the developments of the past months. The plan, as it was introduced, functioned within the confines of the macroeconomic policy rules of the European Monetary Union (EMU) and was restricted by the spending and deficit limits of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) (Stockhammer & Köhler 2015; Ryner 2015). Thus, to a large extent, the EGD relies on inducing private investment to drive the change via public guarantees, and in fact, few novel public funds were introduced in the plan (Clayes & Tagliapietra 2020). The EGD's public-private model has been criticised for not only lacking in terms of the required scale and ambition, but also of socialising the risks of

private investments (Gabor 2020), and indeed more generally an overall private-public approach seems to be of limited use (European Court of Auditors 2018). The current crises, however, have shifted the landscape considerably.

In Europe, the emergency once again invoked an *ad hoc* public sphere of some sort, as the economic crisis reinvigorated familiar debates reminiscent of the early 2010s on (the lack of) solidarity, debt and responsibility. For long, unity was found wanting as nation-states were predominantly attentive to their domestic difficulties. After the early spring of 2020, however, crucial advancements were made. At the early stages of the pandemic SGP rules on deficits and debts were temporarily put on hold, Germany abandoned the country's long-standing commitment to a balanced budget, and talk began of collective recovery. Most importantly, in July 2020 member-states accepted common debt and expenditure (Herszenhorn & Bayer 2020), providing the EU for the first time with some joint fiscal architecture in addition to the common, but by itself ultimately inadequate, monetary policies.

True, the size of the recovery fund may be meagre, crucial funds to research, sustainability and health may have been cut, and there are no guarantees against the prevalence of austerity measures in the future after the initial stimulus packages, as occurred in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Moreover, as differences and disagreements between the northern and southern member-states persist, some of the agreed governance structures are a cause for concern, as they provide member-states with the possibility of inspecting how others spend their particular funds while interrupting the payments for this period, possibly amplifying already existing antagonisms.[6] Nor were any European treaties or decision-making structures altered.[7] But the agreements on collective burden-sharing and international distributive measures are nevertheless important developments from the post-Great Recession years and the eurozone crisis.

These developments ought to be understood as a part of more wide-ranging politico-economic and macroeconomic transformations, as the necessity for public investment and the true nature, power and limits of monetary policy and the role of central banks in the economy are increasingly acknowledged (see, e.g., Tooze 2020b). Here the discussed plans stemming from civil society and the academia have been ahead of the curve.[8] Both the ER and the EJT utilise, even from different spatial perspectives and to somewhat different ends, the insights of heterodox macroeconomic scholarship. To simplify, both initiatives assert that in our contemporary system, where money is created by

6 For early analyses on the recovery plan see, e.g., Tooze 2020a; Varoufakis 2020.

7 At the time when this paper was going into press, Hungary and Poland were also blocking the EU budget and recovery fund due to a rule of law mechanism in the budget.

8 For an analysis on the fiscal and monetary political economy nexus of sustainable states, see Bailey 2020.

central banks via fiat, financing the measures proposed is fundamentally contingent not on available monetary resources but real resources (natural resources, labour, etc.) and possible inflationary pressures, since a sovereign currency issuer such as the European Central Bank (ECB) cannot exhaust its monetary resources.[9]

It is worthwhile to note that such a technical description of the system does not alone guarantee any outcomes, and not all sovereign currency issuers enjoy the same amount of economic policy space. Especially countries of the Global South are much more at the mercy of the international monetary and financial system (Bonizzi, Kaltenbrunner, Michell 2019), even if the true powers of the bond-market to punish deficit-spending states might be exaggerated (Holappa 2020). In any case, the contemporary situation, with governments pumping unforeseen amounts to their economies, clearly supports the above assertions.

As for inflation, whether or not it ensues from public deficit spending is an empirical question on whether there is more demand than the real resources of the economy can answer for.[10] If inflation rises, there are several means, such as taxes and other levies, that governments can utilise to try and halt these pressures. At any rate, given the deep recession (OECD 2020), the unemployment levels and demand shortage we are facing, combined with the long-term trends of declining labour wage shares (Karabarbounis & Neiman 2014), diminished labour bargaining power (Piketty 2020, 530-533, 641; Lavoie & Stockhammer 2013) and the fact that public officials have had difficulties reaching their inflation targets in the past decade, even as central banks have poured trillions to the global economy (Grady 2019), inflation – unlike, say, climate change or social distress – is most likely not the bogeyman one ought to currently worry about, an assertion supported also by recent inflation numbers (Eurostat 2020).

Since the eurozone has, for now, self-constrained its spending capacities, EJT however, does not propose that the EU would finance the transition through ECB. Rather, it proposes a way to bypass the restrictions entrenched in European treaties. Taking a strong stance against the pursuit of balanced budgets for their own sake, the plan asserts that it's public investment plans could be financed by raising funds via the European Investment Bank and other public banks issuing "green bonds" issued exclusively for green investments. The bonds' value would be backed by the ECB and its position as a sovereign currency issuer. Among a number of other propositions, such as regulating the movement of capital, the blueprint also calls for overhauling the ECB's mandate

9 Recently, these insights are often associated with Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), i.e. neo-chartalism. See, e.g., Kelton 2020. MMT's relationship with a more long-standing economic school of thought, post-Keynesianism, is contested. On the two's linkages, see Lavoie 2019.

10 For analyses on the possible inflationary tendencies of some GND initiatives, see Nersisyan & Wray 2019; Galvin & Healy 2020.

from merely maintaining price stability to concrete social and environmental objectives – a plea shared by many others as well (see, e.g., Braun, Gabor, Lemoine 2020).

Broadly speaking, there is a similar approach to fiscal and monetary policies in the plan for ER. However, since it focuses primarily on a national transition, the perspective is different. As eurozone countries have conceded their currency sovereignty, member-states' and thus Finland's capabilities to reconstruct its society is dependent on developments in European politics: positions on debts, deficits and spending, and ECB's working principles. If for example, the SGP rules are permanently scrapped and the ECB's mandate is reformed, the fiscal space of member states is enhanced. Taking into account the contemporary situation, long-term changes in the European politico-economic rationale are most certainly not out of the question, even if more dirigiste states that have left austerity politics behind (see Bergsen et al. 2020) are certainly not an inevitable outcome.

As Ocasio-Cortez's and Markey's RGND is formulated as a congressional resolution, it does not explicitly take any fiscal and monetary policy positions but is nevertheless located in the same broad macroeconomic policy frame as the EJT and ER. But by not having its focus on the material limits of growing economic activity, it possesses more traditional and straightforward Keynesian qualities than the latter two. However, groups affiliated with Ocasio-Cortez's and Markey's resolution have also posited similar fiscal and monetary policy arguments as discussed above on the ultimate boundaries of a socio-ecological transformation (Gunn-Wright & Hockett 2019).

A recent article has argued that during the past two decades there has been an increasing diversification in the economic thinking influencing global climate policies, providing space to ideas emphasising state power and innovation policies instead of only counting on price mechanisms and market solutions (Meckling & Allan 2020). The four initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic are not only further proof of this diversification in the economic framework of climate and environmental policies but especially the EJT and ER are also illustrations of an ongoing qualitative struggle and juncture in fiscal and monetary politics (see The Economist 2020).

TIPPING THE SCALES

Some more general conclusions on the nature of the change envisioned can now be drawn. While all the initiatives, for obvious reasons, consider material changes of paramount importance, in addition, the emphasis is on somewhat different scales of change. The EJT envisages the most radical societal reconstruction, placing its energies behind a continent-wide institutional reform and positing the need for a structural change in the EU's politico-economic rationale. Certainly, there are also considerations of precise

sectoral changes, but they are to come about via a more profound alteration in Europe's *modus operandi*. Furthermore, as discussed above, the blueprint considers the mobilisation of grassroots movements vital for pushing the change. As is stated in the plan, it is a strategy utilising both a "logic of institutionalisation" and a "logic of confrontation".

Even if the EJT positions itself as an alternative to the EU's plans, similarities understandably exist. Both underline legislative change and posit regulation as a crucial item in the transformation toolbox, even if the former's proposals are certainly much more all-encompassing. All the same, not only has the Commission proposed a "Climate Law" to entrench climate targets to EU legislation, but it has also put forward certain resonant regulatory proposals, such as legislation on product and consumer standards. Considering the EU's powers in this area (see, e.g., Bradford 2020), the emphasis is expected. Summoning the means of Brussels, the EGD also outlines changes in a wide scope of sectoral areas. And as we have seen, contrary to the other plans, it gives plenty of weight to technology. The initiative more than once underlines the possibilities that controversial practices such as carbon capture and storage (Hickel & Kallis 2020, 477–478) or on-going trends of "the Fourth Industrial Revolution" from artificial intelligence to 5G and the Internet of Things can provide for the transition, even if it stops short of forthrightly advocating for hypothetical geoengineering techniques such as artificially reflecting solar radiation away from Earth. It is also in this sense that the EGD is reminiscent of the GND proposals of the post-Great Recession years, of what Mastini, Kallis and Hickel have called the "GND 1.0." (Mastini, Kallis, Hickel 2021).

While the RGND remains ambivalent on such issues, the other two assert that placing one's faith in technological progress is not feasible given the speculative nature of many of the technologies and the fact that time is of the essence. Since uncertainty – not of climate change but of technological advancements – prevails, we cannot merely rely on the potential promise of spontaneous creativity and innovation, but rather consider how to solve our problems in the here and now. But uncertainty is not the only issue relating to large-scale technological solutions. Many of these practices involve making far-reaching and untried choices on Earth's fundamental systems (Fuhrman et al. 2020). Who wields the power to make these profound decisions? Furthermore, even if we would solve our contemporary problems with, for example, engineering sunlight back into space, there is nothing that guarantees our capacity or interest to continue these practices in the long-term (Jamieson 2014, 220-221). As far as digital technologies are concerned, so far the evidence seems to indicate that rather than providing any quick fixes to our socio-ecological problems they often tend to intensify the on-going issues (The World in 2050 Initiative 2019) not to mention the novel challenges they pose to our societies.

As for the ER's domains of change, it's key difference to the others is its strong focus

on a cultural transformation. In addition to the comprehensive considerations of the sectoral and material changes required, the plan deems a more fundamental transformation in our way of living vital: a change away from material consumerism to culture and care. Focus on consumer culture is sensible given its vast environmental impacts and the fact that growth in consumption seems to have outpaced the positive effects of technological progress in recent decades (Wiedmann et al. 2020, 2-3). Yet one is left wondering whether the increasing appreciation of environmental problems or focusing public action on a cultural change – as posited in the plan – would be sufficient for the materialisation of such a transformation in values and ways of living. In addition, would it be a consequence of the job guarantee or of fulfilling basic needs – solving the "economic problem" as John Maynard Keynes put it (Keynes 1930, 364-365)?

If so, then one may argue that ER disregards the tendency of capitalism to create inequalities (Piketty 2014) and subsequently increase pressures to compete and accumulate wealth to sustain social imitation and efficiency (Boldizzoni 2020, 83-86). This pressure combined with a propensity for conspicuous consumption (Veblen 2007/1899) or differentiation through consumption (Bourdieu 1984) does not bode well for escaping consumerism. A critique in a similar vein can be applied for the aspiration of culture and care taking the place of consumerism: capitalism's logic of accumulation and tendency for commodification can merely adapt to this shift and turn it to a possibility for amassing wealth (Boldizzoni 2020, 83-86). If one accepts these arguments, then emphasising cultural change as a key part of the overall socio-ecological transformation without an explicit focus on the distribution of wealth and power may appear optimistic.

Such a redistributive focus seems also to be mandated by the fact that it is the consuming habits of the affluent that cause much of environmental ills. And as we have seen, inequalities are decisive obstacles to building meaningful coalitions. Hence, even if the ultimate objective is to address climate change and environmental degradation, not politico-economic structural changes *per se*, even from a pragmatic perspective it would seem to be ill-advised to disregard issues relating to distribution and ownership.

DISTINCTIVE APPROACHES TO SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CHANGE

The above provides us with the always timely reminder that a lot can and must be done, and much of it can be approached in many a different manner – for better or worse. Unlike some actors argue, climate and environmental concerns are most definitely not "beyond politics" (Judt 2019). Rather, the crucial question is how societies respond *politically* to our heating planet and environmental degradation and the social troubles they harbour. Indeed, to quote the historian Adam Tooze, initiatives such as the ones discussed here, perhaps particularly the RGND and EJT, "turn the question from

polar bears and icebergs to political economy" (Sun 2019). ER, too, identifies politics and economy as central to the change required but rather than focusing on questions of power and distribution, it places cultural and material change in the economy at its core. As for the EGD, it says very little on the political, and the plan's mode of change sustains the façade of the separation of the economy from politics and the environment.

But as we can also gather from this inquiry, none of the examined initiatives settle for tinkering but aim for comprehensive change in a wide array of practices. However, they tell somewhat different stories of the future and what the change entails, how and on what scale and scope should it occur, and which actors must be at the forefront of the transformation. Some insist on system-level change on production, ownership or culture, on what we deem as valuable and worthwhile, while one regards technocratic management, growth and technology as remedies for our ills. The "GND platform" is profoundly diverse and this variety ought to be kept in mind. While some of the plans are easily comprehended via previous – always to some extent reductionist – conceptualisations, typologies, and theories of social(-ecological) change or GNDs, others are more elusive of them. Much can, nevertheless, be said.

The EGD, which stems from what can be called "rationalist liberalism" (Dale forthcoming), and can be defined as a "green growth" approach (Dale, Mathai, Puppim de Oliveira 2016; Wiedmann et al. 2020, 5–7), is obviously the most market-oriented of the four, and too strong an emphasis on private investments or price mechanisms runs the danger of strengthening the commodification of the "fictitious commodity" of nature (Polanyi 1944/2001, 71–80; cf. Kallis, Gómez-Baggethun, Zografos 2013). As for the ER, it can perhaps be best situated to a category which Alexander and Rutherford (2014, 4–7) have labelled "radical reformist": an approach to socio-ecological change which considers the state, parliamentary reforms and a "cultural revolution" to ideas and values as the key vehicles for change, and is not explicitly seeking to topple the existing politico-economic institutions or challenging power or class disparities.

For its part, the EJT's approach, while having many similarities, for example, to contemporary ecosocialist approaches (Alexander & Rutherford 2014; Heenan & Sturman 2020), from the democratization of the economy and focusing on working class interests to internationalism, arguably seems to be best described by what the philosopher André Gorz famously labelled as "non-reformist reforms": aiming for reforms not only to solve particular issues such as decarbonization or inequality, but also to emancipate, foster democracy and contribute to the goal of ultimately transcending the system (Gorz 1967). This comes close to what the sociologist Erik Olin Wright has called an approach of "symbiotic transformation": working within the system while reforming also for future progress and empowerment (Wright 2013).

Finally, the RGND, albeit giving plenty of weight to the matter of socioeconomic jus-

tice, maintains the same implicit assumptions on the compatibleness of sustainability and growing material throughput as previous projects of "Green Keynesianism" (Mann & Wainwright 2018, 120-121; Heenan & Sturman 2020). Both the RGND and the EGD, especially the latter, are exemplary of what Brand and colleagues have named a "new critical orthodoxy"; a line of thought recognizing the gravity of the multiple emergencies yet putting their faith on the very same institutions and tools that have been constitutive of the situation – economic growth, dominant politico-economic institutions or market-forces (Brand 2016b; Brand, Görg, Wissen 2020).

The ER and EJT do not fit neatly into this conceptualisation. They certainly problematise the perks of economic growth and the utility of the market in solving our problems while emphasising the very real material limits of the planet. As such, they are approaches that come close to the "GND without growth" that Mastini, Hickel and Kallis have called for to combine insights from both the "GND 2.0." and the increasingly influential yet more marginal idea and field of degrowth (Mastini, Hickel, Kallis 2021). Indeed, Gorz's and Wright's above-mentioned insights on societal change have also been an influence for certain segments within the diverse degrowth movement (Mastini, Hickel, Kallis 2021, 8; D'Alisa & Kallis 2020).[11]

Yet, the ER, much like the RGND likewise, is confronted with a contradiction related to those facing the "new critical orthodoxy". No doubt, the state is the most capable collective institution to coordinate and facilitate a wide-scale transformation (Eckersley 2004, 11-13; Duit, Fiendt, Meadowcroft 2016, 1-3). It is difficult to imagine how either the myriad structural obstacles to sustainable lifestyles, from housing to employment, could be overcome or the decarbonisation of infrastructure undertaken without active public planning of economic activities. Essentially – even if more crudely – this is what states did during the spring and summer of 2020 by shutting down the machine and bringing it gradually back on again. But by predominantly emphasising the role of the state or its possibility to govern and "steer", they run the risk of idealising a future where an inevitably benevolent, informed and progressive state will tackle the issues at hand.[12]

But the state is obviously not inherently progressive or a neutral tool waiting to be utilised, but a condensation of the relations amongst contrasting and competing societal interests (Poulantzas 1978; Jessop 2016), and such optimism can easily prove to be counterproductive. True, the state is theoretically capable of many a remarkable measure, such as employing all who are willing to work in socio-ecologically valuable positions, but this does not mean that it will do so. As the economist Michael Kalecki asserted al-

11 As Mastini, Hickel, and Kallis point out, their thinking on such a reconciliation between the GND and degrowth positions influenced the EJT, to which they contributed to (Mastini, Hickel, Kallis 2020, 6).

12 Such a narrow and harmony-focused view on the "political" of socio-ecological transformations has been the dominant viewpoint in both analytical and political-strategic approaches (Görg et al. 2017).

ready in the 1940s, many with vested interests will attempt to prevent full employment from ensuing, either because of an ideological suspicion to government activity, or, and perhaps more importantly, due to the socio-political alterations full employment would bring about in any given society (Kalecki 1943). Thus, it is only through active political struggle and an analysis of the social actors that will bring the transformation about that such goals can be achieved. This is what the EJT emphasises at the continental level: one cannot ignore the powers that institutions such as the state or the EU possess, but neither should one confuse them as a substitute for collective action urging change.

Be this as it may, both the EJT and ER, each with their different foci, stress the importance of care and sufficiency and reject austerity while the EGD maintains growth at the core of its vision. Within the formers discontinuous mode of change one can recognise a tendency to what the scholars Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, drawing from Antonio Gramsci, have called for in response to climate change: societies *becoming* something different than they are rather than "progressing to an augmented version" of their already existing nature; us discovering novel criterion and meanings for the very notion of progress (Mann & Wainwright 2018, 95-97). The EGD, instead, evokes another insight from Gramsci: the concept of *trasformismo*, a strategy to contain the calls for a more profound societal change in a manner that safeguards that technical changes do not constitute a transformation in social relations or existing politico-economic institutions (Cox 1996, 130-131; Newell 2019, 27-29).[13] The EGD does aspire for a shift in the sustainability of economic activities, but the plan does not entail a change in their purpose or direction. It is not a project of transformation, but a project of incremental change and modernization (Brand, Görg, Wissen 2020). Such a gradual approach is in all likelihood an inapt answer for our pressing plight and heating planet.

CONCLUSION

After all of this is said, however, we would do well to recall that these initiatives are political-*strategic* in nature. They are plans put forward in a given time and place to inspire action and foster change. As Brand, Görg and Wissen have emphasised, even if proposals such as the ones discussed here must always have some analytical substance to make sense of the world, they often favour the strategic aspects at the expense of the analytical, so as not to highlight their innate contradictions (Brand, Görg, Wissen 2020, 172; see also Brand 2016b). From this perspective, the differences and contradictions identified above are not necessarily surprising. Consider the RGND and the EGD. One may argue that their ignorance of the limits of our "imperial mode of living" (Brand &

13 For a discussion on the relationship between Polanyi's and Gramsci's theories of societal transformation, see Morton 2018.

Wissen 2012) is because strategically such an approach is inconceivable to them. The EU must cater to numerous interests, whereas those behind the RGND have possibly considered that in the context of an ethos fixated on the opportunity of continuously growing affluence and a society where many are lacking basic material necessities, there is little chance of discussing, say, the dilemmas of GDP growth.

But something related yet more profound might be at play. Could the unwillingness to take our knowledge of material limits in earnest be explained by a collision to a contradiction that has been dubbed as the "glass ceiling of socio-ecological transformation"? Since the EU and the state must always legitimate their action to the public and aim to provide them with, e.g., well-being and stability, they are struggling to truly take into account the needs of the sustainability of the planetary biophysical system, which differs from the needs of the immediate lifeworld of citizens, and if prioritised would have vast effects on their quality of life. As long as the sustainability of the lifeworld does not severely deteriorate (which it is increasingly beginning to do also in the Global North), the sustainability of the overall system is disregarded (Hausknost 2020).

For its part, the ER's collaborative and pragmatic strategic logic can possibly be interpreted as a tactic to manoeuvre in Finland's political culture marked by consensus-orientation and state-centrism (see Kettunen 2008, 48-64). As to the EJT, its confrontational attitude to the powers that be and the structural change envisioned can be considered impractical, unrealistic or alienating by some. Taking into account the emphasis on grassroot social movement, however, the approach is unsurprising: the purpose is to provide a vision of an alternative, not to be overly "realistic". And there is undoubtedly reason to be wary of co-optation of the GND platform, for example by fossil-fuel companies, as has been argued already to be underway with the EGD (Corporate Europe Observatory 2020). Yet, historically large-scale societal changes have often been possible via wide-ranging coalitions. Similarly, the RGND, even if having a relatively conciliatory social-democratic approach, it has been, as asserted by Tooze, armed with a strategic logic characterised by a firm focus on "frontline communities" instead of exploring wider alliances (Levitz 2020).

But here my ultimate purpose is not to evaluate the particular merits of these strategic logics or to provide any definite answers to the age-old debate relating to compromise and conflict, to reform and revolution. What I believe to be, however, worth stressing, is that if the bias to the strategical at the cost of the analytical is taken too far, there exists the risk of becoming blind both to the paradoxes within one's approach and the contradictions and gaps in the world. These conversations on transformation, change and reconstruction have established themselves in contemporary debates. A relatively broad consensus has emerged that a large-scale shift to a sustainable post-fossil fuel future is required. Now the subject has changed to how this change should come about,

on what scope, for what purpose and whose benefit. The initiatives discussed here are manifestations of some of the contestations that persist. Given the socioeconomic and ecological crises that the COVID-19 pandemic has either augmented, produced or illuminated, and the politico-economic repertoire it has exhibited available to us, it is perhaps the case that there exists more fertile ground for ambitious change than before (Gills 2020). The double task of taking strategic heed of the fluctuating landscapes while not dismissing the contradictions, possible obstacles and gaps an analytical approach highlights will continue to be a demanding but a worthy undertaking for all those in the business of socio-ecological change.

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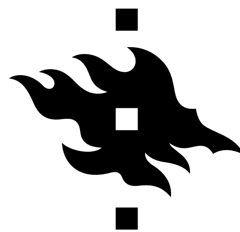

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