

The Politic

The Same “Old Deal,” in Red: Indigenizing Climate Justice and the Green New Deal

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In July, on Hawaii’s Big Island, 30 Native elders were arrested as they blocked a road leading to Maunakea’s summit in an attempt to halt the construction of a \$1.4 billion telescope observatory. Kealoha Pisciotta, a “Protector”—or an Indigenous activist with whom the mountain’s lands share a sacred genealogical connection—described the cursory but emotional confrontation between the elders and Hawaii’s state security forces as “extremely difficult to watch.” As dozens of locals and Protectors chanted and cried, armed police with Kevlar vests tore into protest structures, escorting elders who had been sitting under tents on the road into white vans. Many had to be carried. As Kaho’okahi Kanuha, a leader and elder of the Protectors would later declare: “This is our last stand.”

In the weeks that ensued, images of Native Hawaiian vigils, ceremonies and Indigenous activists proclaiming “Aloha ‘Āina”—“love of the land”—flooded the Internet, dominating the press in the United States and internationally. Challenging the narrative that Indigenous people were opposing development for “the greater good,” University of California astronomers sent out a mass email urging other astronomers to support the Thirty Meter Telescope against “a horde of Native Hawaiians,” and industries like HPM Building Supply and American Savings Bank flagrantly expounded the “tremendous asset” of Maunakea in “[lifting] everyone up.” Still, Indigenous and youth mobilization in Maunakea persisted, bolstered by the advocacy of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who co-sponsored the much-publicized Green New Deal with Senator Ed Markey.

Indeed, Maunakea protests gained national and international traction at a time when exponential calls for climate justice have coalesced around a new legislative centerpiece in the United States: the Green New Deal. Yet, unbeknownst to many, Indigenous-led protests in Maunakea began in 2015, a full year before Ocasio-Cortez’s successful bid for Congress. In 2016, when Indigenous-led protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock were lauded as historic, they were part of a broader constellation of Indigenous environmental movements across North America and the Pacific, including Keystone XL in 2011, Trans Mountain in 2013, and Nihígaal Bee Iiná in 2015, among countless others.

In 2018, Ocasio-Cortez stated that she “first started considering running for Congress, actually, at Standing Rock in North Dakota.” As Indigenous-led movements have galvanized a mainstream consciousness behind proliferating environmentalism in Hawaii and beyond, Indigenous communities have identified a paradigm of climate justice that grounds both

Indigenous liberation and leftist revolution for everyday people through decolonization. Crucially, this paradigm extends beyond the merely anti-capitalist spirit of the Green New Deal, and is rightfully critical of imperialist and racist histories of “New Deals” that have (and continue to) displace Indigenous populations for the sake of “conservation” or “scientific development.” This policy would serve as the best and only answer to Maunakea, the Dakota Access pipeline, and the future of a global climate revolution. It’s name? The Red Deal.

Devised by the Red Nation, a Native resistance organization founded in 2014, the Red Deal is not a counter but rather an extension of the Green New Deal. It is not a “New Deal” because it is the same “Old Deal” that Indigenous populations have perennially upheld—a program for Indigenous treaty rights, sovereignty, self-determination and land restoration that implicitly foregrounds climate justice. Authors of the Red Deal call for action “beyond the scope of the U.S. colonial state.” They intend to mitigate hegemonic political and climate change frameworks in which Indigenous populations are merely acknowledged, and instead address material objectives of decolonization.

Why is it that policymakers in Washington can imagine green innovation and futures but not the return of stolen lands to Indigenous peoples—an end to settler colonialism? History of the original New Deal, or the Indian New Deal, is telling. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 improved infrastructure, brought jobs to reservations, and provided the means to create federally recognized Indigenous councils. However, it also marked the genesis of decades of economic and environmental mobilization according to the idea that settlers can administer and allocate Native lands better than Indigenous peoples themselves.

In 1933, President Roosevelt’s authorization of the National Industrial Recovery Act and the construction of the Missouri River Fort Peck Dam, applauded at the time as the epitome of renewable energy innovation, removed 350 Dakota, Nakota, and Assiniboine families from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Under the Nixon administration, the formation of energy sacrifice zones for “sustainable” nuclear testing entailed the expropriation of nearly 1500 miles of reservation land that were bombed 928 times at a Nevada test site.

Notably, these projects did not arise in a vacuum, but rather as progress in capitalist modernity and an accumulation-based society. Veiled by the spectacular rhetoric of “national energy infrastructure” plans and never-ending “development” phantom dreams championed from congressional floors to high-rise offices, the impulse for accumulation—corporatized and absorbed into a larger doctrine of self-responsibility and market fundamentalism—converged with the military-industrial complex to wreak ecological and cultural havoc on Indigenous grounds in North America.

It is unsurprising, then, that even in 2020, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remains steadfast in his commitment to put pipelines in Northern Wet’suwet’en and Tsilhqot’in territories that will “pay for the country’s transition to a greener future,” despite the 28,666 oil pipeline leaks that have occurred in the last 37 years. After the United States stopped using Kaho‘olawe, one of the eight main Hawaiian Islands, as a target for bombing practice and live-fire training in the 1990s, NASA soon began accepting bids for the bulldozing and construction of a Thirty Meter Telescope on Maunakea, undeterred by environmental activist calls that the project violated Indigenous rights and would spoil the already fragile Hawaiian ecosystem.

Amidst constant extractive assaults, Native Hawaiians' adage for life has remained unchanged. "Kapu Aloha" emphasizes compassionate responses towards both the land and opponents, and learning to live and be interdependent with Mother Nature.

For Red Nation, living and being interdependent with Mother Nature is explicitly anti-capitalist. An ethos merely hinted at in the Green New Deal, the Red Deal understands that capitalism fundamentally protects wealth, not life, and that climate change is only a symptom of a much longer series of ecological calamities caused by the prioritization of a profit incentive. For that reason, the Red Deal rejects the "net zero emissions" language of the AOC-Markey resolution, which implies the use of techno-fixes and carbon accounting that includes various types of carbon pricing systems, offsets and/or Payments for Ecological Services (PES). More broadly, it rejects language that commodifies nature under a "green economy" or which quantifies the Earth's cycles—carbon, water, forests, biodiversity—by turning them into "units," or in Hawaii, into "tremendous asset[s]" to be traded in speculative and financial markets.

In California, research shows that under the cap and trade scheme, it is cheaper for a majority of polluting oil refineries to buy so-called carbon in trees rather than reduce emissions at the source. Economists Enno Schröder and Servaas Storm reinforce this analysis in their critique of proposals for the chimera commonly referred to as "green growth."

"The belief that any of this half-hearted tinkering will lead to drastic cuts in CO2 emissions in the future is plain self-deceit," they write in *Why "Green Growth" is an Illusion*. Rather, the "future must be radically different from the past," devoid of simple corrective pricing and offset mechanisms, technological fixes on the supply side, and nudges via incentives to industry that persist under business-as-usual economics. Economic output on the whole must shrink. For the Red Nation and Indigenous organizations like the Indigenous Environmental Network, this starts with keeping all fossil fuels in the ground by imposing an absolute moratorium on all new fossil fuels extraction.

Western science and economics are just now concluding what Indigenous knowledge systems have implicitly understood for centuries—that a society rooted in extraction and capital accumulation would produce inevitable biospheric collapse. It is of little surprise then that an alternative model to the existing "Weitiko"—which means "cannibal" in Algonquin—economy has existed and been practiced by Indigenous populations for millenia. In a "caretaking economy," Water Protectors, Land Defenders, educators, and healthcare workers, diametrically opposed to the caretakers of capital and violence, such as corporations, prisons, the military, and police, have already undertaken "green jobs," centering relationships to one another and the Earth over profit. The ostensible backwardness of Indigenous knowledge and progressive character of capitalism is thus turned on its head.

Ecological destruction engendered by capitalist development has been significantly less severe in regions managed by Indigenous communities. Similarly, Indigenous people protect more than 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity, despite consisting of less than five percent of the world's population. And yet, Indigenous people are incarcerated at a rate 38 percent higher than the U.S.

national average. Following the Standing Rock protests, more than eight states adopted laws criminalizing the protesting of oil pipelines.

Alongside the arrests of the elders in Maunakea, these statistics only reinforce the necessity of sweeping decolonization espoused by the Red Deal: ending the criminalization of Indigenous caretakers (and moreover, those who are often rendered pawns to capital accrument like the poor and unhoused) and adopting a more expansive recognition of tribal organizations such as Native universities and colleges to eliminate the cultural chauvinism that value Indigenous systems of thought as true insofar as they don't challenge Western truths. Most importantly, the Red Deal protects Indigenous rights and governance. This would allow for the bottom-up environmental policy and land restoration that have historically proven effective and visionary but been constrained since the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century.

In insisting upon the autonomy of Indigenous communities to implement their own Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) laws and protocols, the Red Deal specifically buttresses the language of the Green New Deal, and calls for reform of Indigenous laws inadequately equipped to handle land claims fights with the federal government, particularly in areas where no treaties were signed. The Red Deal pivots around Indigenous lives—those who have been on the forefront of environmental battlegrounds—as right holders *and* stakeholders, noting historical state conservation policies to create State and National Parks, and the present struggles of Zapatista activists and Indigenous Ogiek People in the Mau Forest contesting climate action and conservation as a pretext for governments and the United Nations displacing them from Native lands. Policies oblivious to the histories and symbiosis of Indigenous communities with traditional lands produce the same, if not worse, outcomes as extraction. Consequently, it is clear that America's optimal environmental policy going forward is to start giving back the land, and to recognize that decolonization in conjunction with a radical disruption of hydrocarbon energy is not just possible, but necessary.

Under the Red Deal, the struggle for Indigenous liberation and climate justice is tied to the liberation of the working class, of migrants, and of Black and Latinx communities subject to everyday violence at the border, in prisons, and in militarized corners of the Global South. The Red Deal is as much a manifesto as it is a tribute to the experiences of those like Claudia Patricia Gómez González, an Indigenous woman from Guatemala shot to death at the border, and Roxana Hernandez, a trans Indigenous woman who died while being detained in an ICE detention facility. As imperialist and corporate projects proliferate along with extreme weather events, migration will proliferate, and so too will the capital of a securitized border and carceral complex increasingly convinced of the disposability of vulnerable bodies.

The Green New Deal refers to climate change in passing as a potential “threat multiplier.” Under the Trump administration, however, the military has already begun conflating national security with “going green,” shoring up its military capabilities and anticipating “local problems” in Africa, Asia and the Middle East in the form of 22 million mobile potential security threats: climate refugees. Geopolitics dictated by capitalism means the U.S. military will always protect the wealth of its own citizens and economy, while forsaking the livelihoods of those in countries whose present conditions are deeply intertwined with extensive histories of U.S. interference, resource extraction and destabilization. The Red Deal, cognizant of this intrinsic, cruel tendency of capitalist states, thus strategizes for abolition and demilitarization, and for staunch divestment

to fund lackluster safety nets, more resilient homes and greener relations between humans and nonhumans: between Indigenous youth, women, migrants, Black people, LGBTQ+ people and sacred mountains and waters.

In a more profound sense then, the Red Deal is invested not only in ecological transformation, but the transformation of an extractive mindset or culture—a proclivity to view the natural world and the majority of its inhabitants as resources to use up and then discard. That is, if Francis Bacon’s original, doctrinal framework for the extractive economy was the intellectual prelude to entire American landscapes depleted by frackers, miners, and drillers; to workers crippled by cycles of overwork and abandoned to addiction and despair; and to carceral institutions that sees individuals as more profitable locked up than as free workers; then the Red Deal draws from from Indigenous-led movements in Bolivia and Ecuador that have essentialized within their calls for ecological amelioration the concept of *buen vivir*, or the right to a good life. This right implicates a holistic reorganization of societal values, beginning, as a “caretaking economy” suggests, with placing a higher premium on low-carbon caregiving and caretaking activities, including learning from Indigenous populations and interrogating the pay and visibility gap between carceral and military workers to that of everyday care workers.

In Maunakea, the elders decided that rather than having to see their young children and people being arrested, that they were going to take the arrests. It is this spirit of caretaking—of people and nature—that must be embraced and harnessed for a successful climate revolution.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2019, former Trump advisor Sebastian Gorka trounced the Green New Deal, summarizing with equal parts condescension and apocalyptic zeal: “[The Green New Deal is] green on the outside, deep, deep communist red on the inside. . . . They want to take your pickup truck, they want to rebuild your home, they want to take away your hamburgers. This is what Stalin dreamt about but never achieved.” Meanwhile, Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute proclaimed in *USA Today* that the Green New Deal is a “radical front for nationalizing our economy,” an extreme socialist pie-in-the-sky. As the Red Deal, an even more rigorous program than the Green New Deal, enters and ignites spaces of public discourse, it will doubtlessly encounter persistent strikes from the right: from political elites to lobbyists to think tanks acting as public proxies for sinister industry interests.

Nevertheless, proponents of the Red Deal are unshrinking. Its Indigenous authors draw from the traditions of democratic socialism, practicing “people power” and rejecting the fear-mongering and deceptive language of the right that imagines an authoritarian dystopia to name an equitable, imperative reality: the reallocation of social and environmental wealth to those who actually produce and maintain them. The blueprint for this is simple: “[reaching] out directly to people, hitting the streets and galvanizing the support of the community,” as pronounced in the Red Nation’s September 2019 draft of the Red Deal.

Back in Maunakea, Kealoha Pisciotta, one of the protest leaders and a spokesperson for Anaina Hou, a leading Native Hawaiian activist organization, says that “a new renaissance” is brewing. Yet, if history has demonstrated anything, it is not only that the Green New Deal is not enough, but that every struggle is a climate struggle, and that Indigenous liberation is everyone’s liberation.

Still, to achieve the radical transformation of all social relations between humans and the Earth required to prevent the extinction of this planet, all people must learn to adhere to the philosophies of abolition, decolonization and demilitarization, and to proclaim their own “Aloha ‘Āina,” their own love of the land. Indigenizing climate justice, and partaking in an Indigenous vision beyond the Green New Deal—the Red Deal—is unquestionably the best place to start.