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Júlia Martí Comas

**Ecofeminist review
of the proposals for
a Green New Deal**

Júlia Martí Comas

Ecofeminist review of the proposals for a Green New Deal

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Introduction

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What follows is a critical review from an ecofeminist point of view of the proposals *The Green New Deal for Europe*, by the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM 25), and the

resolution *Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal* tabled by Ocasio-Cortez in the US Congress in February 2019.¹

Including the ecofeminist approach in the diagnosis of the crisis

First of all, regarding analysis of the crisis, both proposals make reference to the consequences of climate change and the environmental crisis, economic stagnation, growing inequality (by race, class and gender), impoverishment and the impossibility of meeting basic needs, the crisis in public services and the increased vulnerability of certain communities such as migrants, indigenous people, women, the elderly, rural populations and so on. Furthermore, the Ocasio-Cortez proposal also recognises the multiplier effect climate change has on threats and conflicts, while the DiEM25 proposal focuses on the crisis of democracy.

However, while recognising some differential impacts of the social-environmental crisis, they do not properly analyse the links between the environmental crisis and the reproductive crisis, and the need to respond to both of them together. As Mary Mellor states, we must not forget “the role played by reproductive work in mediating between nature and ‘the economy’, through the daily regeneration of human (and non-human) life”. This author also points out the importance of recognising not only that nature is finite, but that care work, necessary to sustain life in increasingly adverse circumstances, is also finite. This finite nature of care work is recompensed with scenarios of increasing exploitation, poor care and transnationalisation through global care networks.²

Specifically, global care networks are an example of the importance of combining ecologist and feminist analysis, as they reveal a crisis of care that is solved by delegating care tasks to migrant women workers, who in turn leave their families in the care of other women. But at the same time, they are related to the social-economic crisis, as many of the displacements are caused by extractivism or climate change.

Moreover, while they recognise the growing difficulties in access to resources and services necessary for a decent life (water, energy, food, housing, health, education and care) in a context of social and economic crisis and austerity in public services, it would be useful to analyse this growing insecurity of life from the feminist standpoint of the reproductive crisis, which would allow a better understanding of its causes and consequences and how to combat it. Specifically, it is important to realise the fundamental role played by domestic and care work in capitalist reproduction, i.e. to see it as work comparable to other labour, not just as a source of well-being for the community (as it is seen in the DiEM25 proposal), but as essential labour for which all involved should take responsibility. This avoids falling into discourses that mysticise care work and instead of transforming the current model reinforce the discrimination and power relationships involved in it.³

1 DiEM25 (2019) *The Green New Deal for Europe* <https://report.gndforeurope.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Blueprint-for-Europes-Just-Transition-2nd-Ed.pdf>;

Ocasio-Cortez (2019) H. RES. 109, *Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal*, House of Representatives. <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/gnd>

2 Mary Mellor (2019) “An Eco-Feminist Proposal. Sufficient Provisioning and Democratic Money” *New Left Review*

3 Tithi Bhattacharya (2018) “Reproducción social del trabajo y clase obrera global”, *Viento Sur*. <https://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article13491>

It would be worth taking into account how the environmental crisis is aggravating the reproductive crisis: for example, due to the increase in illnesses caused by air pollution, water pollution or contamination of the food we consume. In this respect, both the Ocasio-Cortez and the DiEM25 proposals take into account the link between health and climate, but not the gender bias in illnesses linked to the environmental crisis. This unequal impact exists, for example, in the higher exposure of women to toxic elements (such as receipts containing bisphenol in the case of supermarket workers or higher exposure to cleaning products), and in an overload of work due to the responsibility of caring for sick family members.

(De)growth, an ecofeminist view

One of the most hotly-debated issues in relation to the Green New Deal proposals concerns the analysis of growth. In the first place, regarding the Ocasio-Cortez proposal, while it does not deal with the topic directly, there is an underlying recognition that economic development can be driven by an environmental transformation of the economy that reduces greenhouse emissions. That is to say, the form of production can be transformed, together with the sources of energy, without any need to put a brake on economic growth. Faced with this assumption, an ecofeminist view that takes into account the biophysical limits of the planet, argues for the urgency of a drastic reduction in material consumption, as well as the impossibility of decoupling material growth from the economics of growth in GDP. That is to say, it is difficult to respond to the environmental emergency without breaking away from the capitalist framework of unlimited growth.

DiEM25 undertakes a more detailed analysis of this issue, recognising that growth-based economic policies have failed (page 27), and even criticises the false solutions of “green growth” due to the impossibility of keeping up current energy consumption from renewable sources. In this respect it discusses, for example, the need to decarbonise

Finally, although both proposals take into account the link between the environmental crisis and forced displacements, they analyse it in an overly superficial way that fails to expose the levels of violence involved in a system based on expulsions and frontiers. Likewise the violent practices inherent to a system in crisis, with deep hetero-patriarchal, racist and classist roots. These violent processes form part of scenarios of regional exploitation, in migration routes, in immigration laws, in mechanisms criminalising poverty, in patriarchal households, in processes of rupture of the social fabric and so on, and any proposal for eco-social transition should take them into account in its horizon for transformation.

the economy, to cut overall energy consumption and material production, to foster an economy based on “social and environmental reproduction” and to create a new indicator of progress to replace GDP (page 31). Specifically, it advocates decoupling prosperity from economic growth so that welfare is not determined by growth in production and consumption (page 57).

The diagnosis given by DiEM25 concerning the consequences of economic growth can therefore be said to be closer to that raised by social ecologism and ecofeminism, but even so it still uses a language more appropriate to a paradigm of plenty than one of austerity. The constant references to human flourishing as a synonym of well-being indicate a supposed scenario of constant progress and improvement which does not chime with ecofeminist proposals to “live well with less”⁴. Moreover, though some sectors are mentioned as needing transformation in order to de-grow (like the arms industry or supply chains), there is no coherent analysis of which sectors should drastically cut their consumption of materials and energy. Also mentioned in passing is the importance of transforming social expectations of consumption (page 65), but no specific proposals with regard to the transformation of modes of

4 It might be clearer that “prosperity” has been linked to progress and to a certain extent to growth. It is true that it should not always be like this, but ultimately it is a question of making clear that any ecofeminist scenario (regardless of what we call it) should propose a change in the concept of well-being which breaks with the idea of a stairway going ever upwards.

living and the need to foster scenarios of self-restraint and sufficiency.⁵

The switch to a more austere life⁶ but one that guarantees basic needs are met has been a recurring topic in feminist economics and ecofeminism. Mary Mellor argues that, “Sufficiency is an egalitarian concept: sufficiency for one must be sufficiency for all, or else some will have more than enough and others too little.” She therefore argues for balancing two principles: environmental sustainability and social justice. Amaia Pérez Orozco, on the other hand, suggests the concept of “decessities⁷” as a way of allowing

a more complex analysis of needs that will always depend on personal context and experiences. She also recalls, “It is crucial not to forget that these are material, tangible, and also affective/relational, intangible.” In this respect, ecofeminist reflection on interdependence and the importance of the affective/relational sphere can be the starting point for the necessary dispute over cultural hegemony, to disseminate a concept of living well that is not linked to consumption, production or growth and to “construct horizons of desire coherent with the material conditions that make them possible”.⁸

Democratising the processes and goods essential to sustain life

The Ocasio-Cortez proposal argues for major investments to guarantee, among other things, access to adequate housing, food, transport, water and health. DiEM25 also suggests the public purchase of public service companies (page 45) to ensure that essential services like energy, health, housing, water and transport are in public hands, so guaranteeing that the environmental crisis and the general interest are taken into account in their running. Specifically, they suggest, for example, the importance of decommercialising areas like the pharmaceutical industry and the care sector, as private running of these has led to insecure working and care conditions.

In this respect, the DiEM25 proposals are in line with an ecofeminist approach of democratising the processes and goods essential to sustain life, such as food, water, energy,

housing and care. However, it would be interesting for the proposal to include a multi-scale approach that also envisaged a transformation of these sectors at the lowest level. That is to say, the new paradigm for public running of services should not simply involve state control, but allow households to stop being mere consumers of services, politicising everything that goes on within them to give the domestic and community sphere a central role in running them.

This multi-scale paradigm, in which communities and households play a specific part, will make it possible to reassess, in a democratic way, the model of social reproduction to avoid extractive, exploitative paradigms. Like this strategies can be fostered to return care, access to water, energy, housing and food to public hands without simply

5 Julia Weingärtner & Marta Monasterio Martín (2010) “Poner la vida en el centro: respuestas del ecofeminismo y del decrecimiento a la UE” *Ecologistas en Acción*.

6 It is true that the word austerity has been “stolen” from us and in general today it is associated with the Troika’s neoliberal policies, which is why we would sometimes talk about “austericide” so as not hand over the concept to them so easily. I think we need to carry on calling for an austere life where basic needs are met... an approach for which ecosocialists like Jorge Riechmann have been arguing for some time. In any case, we could look for a way to carry on arguing for the concept but using another word that does not cause so much confusion, though I cannot think of one.

7 Amaia Pérez Orozco (*Subversión feminista de la economía* [Feminist Subversion of the Economy], 2014) revives the “decessities” concept launched by Central American women in the context of Popular Education to resignify the idea of “necessities” without separating it from “desires”, so calling for something more than just assuming necessities that are often defined by others.

8 Mary Mellor (2019) “An Eco-Feminist Proposal. Sufficient Provisioning and Democratic Money” *New Left Review*
Amaia Pérez Orozco (2014) *Subversión feminista de la economía. Aportes para un debate sobre el conflicto capital-vida*. Traficantes de Sueños

transforming what happens outside the home, but also daring to crack open the domestic confinement that generally prevails in everything to do with social reproduction.

A first step towards this reorganisation is to reduce complexity and re-localise. This means switching away from depending on global markets and big transnationals to establish mechanisms whereby care and the production and distribution of goods are rooted in the region, according to

criteria that do not depend on their profitability and guarantee accessibility and sustainability. This means that in a scenario of democratisation of energy, food, housing and care the big power companies, agro-industrial concerns, food chains, construction firms and multi-service corporations would no longer have a place. The processes and goods essential for life should be common property, not subject to capitalist accumulation, managed by state or community instances or jointly by both.

The sustainability of life and care at the centre

The Ocasio-Cortez proposal does not mention the reproductive crisis or the role of care work in its proposals for change. The DiEM25 proposal, on the other hand, does mention reproductive and care work and its main proposals are, firstly, to set up a “Health and Care Standard” to establish the criteria for decent social protection and health services, to foster investment and a transition towards a more decentralised, public model (page 48); and secondly, to create a “Care Income” to recognise and recompense the people who devote all or part of their time to caring for family members, the community or the environment (page 36).

The problem with these proposals is that while they recognise the current crisis in care and the situations of exploitation and insecurity it creates for women in particular, they offer no ideas for transforming gender roles and putting an end to the current sexual division of labour. In fact, this issue is only raised in relation to the housing model (page 42), instead of treating it as a transversal question cutting across the green job creation programme, recovering public services and financial criteria.

Specifically, the Care Income recalls the proposals for “Wages for Housework” of the 70s, which feminist debates have moved on from in recent decades. Today the feminist movement places the focus on seeking ways to create public and social joint responsibility for care work to move beyond family-centred models; as well as denouncing the risk of basing state subsidies on moralist welfare paradigms which aim to reinforce the patriarchal nuclear family. It can

therefore be said that proposals in this area must include reproductive justice with all its sharp edges, recognising and expanding diverse households and freely-chosen ways of living together and collectively taking responsibility for sustaining life, without relegating any of the tasks necessary to protect life to the closed sphere of the home or opting for individual, commercialised solutions to meet these needs.

The way of making these proposals happen continues to be discussed and crystallised within the feminist movement itself, where the recent feminist strikes have been a key space for experimenting in how to reorganise care and reproduction. In this respect, an interesting contribution to the debate is the “feminist wage” proposed by Cavallero and Gago in Argentina. Specifically, they propose a system of income redistribution aimed at local care and self-management networks that already exist as a response to violence and dispossession, to serve as economic recognition and guarantee their autonomy, without any patriarchal mediation. This notion of collective distribution of income could be useful to enrich the debate on how to avoid falling into models that remain based on each individual meeting their needs individually using the market.⁹

Also of interest are the feminist debates about the universal basic income, which emphasise the importance of seeking a way for the distribution of income not to reinforce the existing model of social reproduction. Under this model, not only does responsibility for care continue to fall largely

⁹ Luci Cavallero & Verónica Gago (2019) “Diez tesis sobre la economía feminista (o sobre el antagonismo entre huelga y finanzas)”, *Viento Sur*, issue 164.

on women, but also the responsibility for coping with all the impacts inflicted by the market is left up to families. Also argued is how important it is for the establishment of a basic income to go hand in hand with a new tax model which would make it possible to move towards employers taking responsibility for all the reproductive work from which they benefit invisibly.

Another topic of concern for ecofeminists concerns the role reproductive work should play in a new ecosocial model. In this respect, the DiEM25 proposal recognises that a reduction in material production will have to go together with an increase in social and environmental reproduction, favouring maintenance, recycling, repair and restoration of the environment and infrastructures, as well as in the areas of care, culture and education. However, it does not take into account the impact the transition will have on the everyday sphere, or mention demand management strategies to

put an end to consumerism and bring about a consumption linked to needs that does not exceed the planet's biophysical limits, or the gender slant these strategies would involve.

Specifically, the end of labour exploitation and a shift to sustainable production could increase the price of certain products and services, which is why access to them should be guaranteed outside the market. At the same time, the reduction of energy consumption, food based on agro-ecological produce and the end of the disposable model might increase care time, so mechanisms of joint responsibility need to be considered to avoid overloading women with work. This is why we raise the need to politicise the everyday and take the meeting of needs out of the home, as a way of collectivising this responsibility and seeking collective ways to guarantee access to necessary resources and services in a sustainable way.

Distribution and democratisation of all socially necessary work and the wealth it generates.

A central feature of both Green New Deal proposals is the defence of employment. Ocasio-Cortez opts for an environmental transition to allow the defence of decent employment conditions and the creation of jobs in the country. Likewise, a central plank of the DiEM25 proposal is the creation of a programme of investment in Green Public Works which would create new jobs to stop the social crisis we are already seeing from deepening and make up for the jobs lost in polluting industries.

Some of the measures in this programme include a guarantee of decent work through the creation of public employment, with a 4-day working week, democratic control by workers and local distribution. These jobs will be dedicated to anything of social value (care, habitat restoration, community services and so on) (page 35). Like this it suggests a scenario in which the shifting of economic activity away from material production would also help pave the way to a post-work future. (page 36).

Assessment of this proposal from an ecofeminist point of view shows that it enters fully into one of the ongoing dis-

cussions among feminisms, which is the concept of work and its future. Thus, on the one hand the proposal to create employment with social value would chime with the ecofeminist option to link jobs to the sustainability of life; likewise, the proposed reduction in working hours is a fundamental measure to reorganise time in a feminist way. On the other hand, however, there are some shortcomings that should be pointed out. First, the idea that economic activity can be "dematerialised" is mistaken because, as ecofeminism states, not only are we interdependent, we are also ecocodependent. Therefore, a non-extractivist socio-economic activity coherent with the planet's biophysical limits would still have an important material weight and work as such could not disappear.

Second, the reductionist view of work as what one does for a wage is problematic. We know that many jobs are necessary to sustain life; the debate is over how to organise them. This concept of work decoupled from its waged form enables us not only to recognise all the essential jobs that have been rendered invisible because they lack economic recognition, but also to consider ways of de-commercial-

ising and collectivising the meeting of social needs, i.e. de-labourising access to rights and prioritising non-commercial ways of accessing the material, social and cultural resources necessary to lead a decent life. As well as ways of moving towards non-alienated jobs based on paradigms of self-management and participation.¹⁰

Third, the model proposed explicitly separates care work from other work, by creating a specific income for care work, the Care Income. This differentiation, in addition to all the issues mentioned above, actually consolidates the patriarchal separation between reproductive and productive work which has been so useful to capitalism to sustain itself on the basis of enormous amounts of insecure, free labour.

Finally, the Green Public Works proposal may be very advanced in the way it organises these jobs, the conditions it proposes and its goals. But it is rather lame if it is not accompanied by a package of measures aimed at dignifying all jobs, especially those that depend on an increas-

ingly globalised, deregulated labour market. In this respect, measures need implementing to put an end to the exploitation, pay differentials and vertical and horizontal segregation on the labour market and end unrecognised care in the case of unpaid jobs.

From an ecofeminist point of view, therefore, it would be of more interest to opt for the distribution and democratisation of all socially necessary jobs, linked to a plan to distribute wealth. This would go hand in hand with measures to take resources away from the capital accumulation model, reforming the current tax system, reversing privatisations, auditing and writing off debts, taking back public control of new spheres and protecting physical spaces and activities against incursions by big companies. Some of the measures proposed by DiEM25 work in this direction, such as the end of tax havens, charges on financial transactions and environmental impact and democratic, environmental criteria for public spending, but they remain timid if the aim is to reverse today's inequality.

The rural sphere and the agri-food system

A sector that receives special attention in the proposals considered is that of agri-food, with proposals to support rural development and foster the environmental transition in agriculture. For example, the Ocasio-Cortez proposal suggests supporting family farming, investing in sustainable farming and fostering a new food system to guarantee access to healthy food. DiEM25, on the other hand, proposes fostering an agrarian transition based on a reduction in harmful practices, support for regenerative and sustainable practices and a guarantee of a fair model for Europe and the rest of the world (page 53). More specifically, it opts to introduce sustainable performance conditions for subsidies in the sector, decent incomes for workers, regional cohesion measures and a supermarket labelling system that specifies emissions and nutritional information.

Without belittling the importance of these measures and the urgency of transforming the farm subsidy model in the

European Union, it must be said that these measures are completely insufficient if they do not recognise and make visible the demands of rural people. In the DiEM25 proposal, for example, food sovereignty is mentioned, but is reduced to a series of regenerative or sustainable farming activities (page 53) which do not take into account the whole alternative model for production, sale and supply involved in this proposition.

To do this would involve recognising feminist food sovereignty and agro-ecology proposals which enrich the debate about the food model, the town-country relationship, the recovery of ecosystems and rural development, avoiding the masculine, urban-centred view that generally impregnates these debates. In this respect, an agroecofeminist viewpoint opts "for food to stop being a business and become a right over which we have the power of decision and sovereignty, including sovereignty over the territory

¹⁰ Gorka Martija (2020) "Trabajos emancipados frente a la ofensiva capitalista. Impactos y alternativas a los tratados comerciales en Hego Euskal Herria", OMAL.

that feeds us". It also sees the food chain as something circular: production, distribution, supply and the household being the link that holds them together, making visible all the types of care necessary for the chain to function.¹¹

Its proposals include shifting from a masculinised food system that ignores the region and country people to a model based on country people, de-commercialisation and collectivisation. This makes it necessary to further develop the set of proposals to defend rural economies, not restricting them to economic subsidies alone but also taking into account the whole socio-economic fabric necessary to achieve food sovereignty. Fostering a model that does not depend on market inputs, in which there is shared respon-

sibility for all the necessary jobs (with time in the kitchen as a place of work and a meeting place), and where provisioning is dealt with through short circuits, both buying/selling and consumption and exchange of one's own produce.

The DiEM25 text defends community models of farming (page 53), but it would be interesting for it to opt for more of an overall view of the agri-food sector. With measures to foster organisation between different people throughout the food chain, from production to consumption, including schools, local authorities and other institutions. Like this they could include much more transformational measures to promote healthy food, such as organic community canteens.

Repaying the environmental debt to the global south

Though timidly, to different extents both the proposals assessed consider the global dimension of the environmental crisis and the responsibility of both Europe and the USA. The Ocasio-Cortez proposal suggests encouraging the international exchange of technology, knowledge, products, finance and services to support other countries in implementing the Green New Deal, as well as ending the transferring of jobs and pollution abroad. DiEM25 proposes, among other measures, legislating on national and international supply chains in line with criteria of sustainability and justice, penalising investment in non-renewable sectors, entrenching sustainability within all firms, renegotiating World Trade Organisation rules to incorporate human rights, setting up an Environmental Abuse Directive to recognise the personal, punitive responsibility of those who benefit from pollution and setting up an Environmental Justice Commission.

Most of these proposals fall within the category of voluntary recommendations, with a few exceptions like the proposal to codify ecocide as a "crime against humanity" (page 75). Dramatic examples like the proposal for a prize for sustainability clearly indicate an approach largely based on

voluntarism, similar to the ideas behind CSR¹², rather than on proposals aimed at expanding regulation, checks and legal routes for access to justice for affected communities.

Therefore, though much effort has gone into describing the role of the Environmental Justice Commission, the general approach raises certain doubts about the ability of the proposal to halt the consequences of productivism, offshoring of costs to the global south, indebtedness or the commercialisation of common goods. This would require a more detailed analysis of the role played by transnational companies (and above all the network of financial institutions, trade treaties, arbitration courts and so on) in intensifying these impacts, accompanied by more specific measures to end corporate impunity and make companies assume their social and environmental externalities. Especially worrying are the impacts of projects which are considered clean, but which retain the logic of territorial plunder and labour exploitation. Also needed are methods of dismantling trade treaties and the mechanisms of indebtedness.

It would also be essential to include proposals aimed at repaying the environmental debt to the global south built

11 Colectiva XXX (2020) "Derivas feministas hacia el bien vivir" OMAL, *Paz con Dignidad y Colectiva XXX*.

12 Corporate Social Responsibility. We consider this a proposition based on voluntary unilateralism, self-regulation, and therefore it does not guarantee respect for human rights, especially bearing in mind that it does not include mechanisms for monitoring and supervision.

up over decades (we do not know whether the international exchange proposed by Ocasio-Cortez goes in this direction, but the way it is suggested raises doubts over whether it might in fact activate new mechanisms for colonial relations between countries). It would therefore be appropriate to pursue strategies to repay debts (environ-

mental, economic and gender), whether through unconditional finance, technology transfer or repair of ecosystems, as well as expanding solidarity and accepting survivors of this system by opening borders and supporting the struggles of defenders of their territory.

Opting for local, popular and intersectional transitions

Finally, it must be asked which subjects are to drive the transition (or transitions), paying special attention to avoiding urban-centric, eurocentric and androcentric approaches that ignore the experiences and knowledge of groups that are essential to drive any transition. It is crucial not to let concern over the loss of polluting jobs filled by white workers eclipse concern for the future of the defenders of the territory, country people, care workers, displaced populations or those whose health has been damaged by pollutants.

To some extent this view is present in the proposals assessed. The Ocasio-Cortez text, for example refers to the indigenous people and communities most affected by the crisis; and the DiEM25 proposal repeatedly mentions the importance of community-led projects and the democratisation of jobs and finance. But what we do not know is how these processes are to be driven, how it is to be ensured that it is not a top-down process and will really be community-led.

In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that to put the intersectional option into practice it is necessary to start from the local, to foster transitions rooted in the terri-

tory and its population. Only like this it is possible to foster open, democratic and sustainable processes that inter-link with other projects to increase their scale. Starting from the local also makes it possible to give visibility and recognition to a multitude of local alternatives that are already in operation. Placing the focus on popular ecofeminism already in existence can make it possible to avoid techno-utopias and instead value proposals that set out from the here and now.

It is also important to consider how these *Green New Deal* proposals are intended to inter-relate with organised movements. It must be asked how far these proposals actually help the ecologist and feminist movement to consolidate its positions or, on the contrary, they could become a brake on its demands and positions, based on the logic of acceptable demands. In this respect, it is worrying that to a certain extent the proposals lag behind movements and public opinion that was starting to accept much more transformational concepts in relation, for example, to the urgency of drastic socio-economic measures to limit global warming to within 1.5°C, or the need for shared public, business and community responsibility for care.

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