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A Green New Deal for Social Work

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People are aware that they cannot continue in the same old way but are immobilized because they cannot imagine an alternative. We need a vision that recognizes that we are at one of the great turning points in human history when the survival of our planet and the restoration of our humanity require a great sea change in our ecological, economic, political, and spiritual values.

Activist, community leader Grace Lee Boggs (1998, p. 254)

On February 7, 2019, newly elected U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and seasoned U.S. Senator Ed Markey released a plan for a Green New Deal, so named to inspire the stimulus package they propose for the United States to address pressing economic and environmental concerns. This Green New Deal outlines unprecedented investment in public works projects, financial reforms, and welfare programs to tackle climate change *and* related “systemic injustices.” Consensus within the scientific community attributes the acceleration in global warming to human activity (Oreskes, 2004, p. 242, quoting World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) with devastating effects on human health and welfare due to pollution, drought, extreme cold and heat waves, more frequent and more powerful storms (e.g., hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, and flooding; Gamble, Ebi, Grambsch, Sussman, & Wilbanks, 2008). Growing concern for climate change informed a November 2018 mandate for “Women and Climate Action” authored by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women and United Nations Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. Mlambo-Ngcuka (2018) declared that “climate change and gender inequality are arguably two of the greatest sustainable development challenges of our time” (as cited in Brownworth, 2019). While the effects of climate change impact all people, gender inequality amplifies the effects of climate change for women and girls who, Mlambo-Ngcuka notes, make up 70% of people living in poverty worldwide and disproportionately perform unpaid care and domestic work which will likely increase with climate change (Brownworth, 2019). As Park and Miller (2006) argue, environmental disasters are hardly “natural.” Marginalized populations who face intersecting structural inequalities are more likely to live and work in regions with higher

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industrial toxins, are more likely to face water and energy shortages due to drought and storms, and are less likely to be rescued or receive support to recover from environmental disasters. Working with marginalized populations to address systemic gender inequality is consistent with social work's commitment to social justice and human rights. Yet, the social work profession has been slow to address climate crises as a critical concern for social work knowledge and practice (Dominelli, 2014).

In this editorial, we consider what climate action would mean for the social work profession. We first review some of the Green New Deal proposals in the United Kingdom, Canada, and in the United States that emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. We then discuss scholarship from a growing contingent of scholars who outline environmental, sustainable, and ecological frameworks for social work research and practice. Drawing upon ecofeminist and decolonial praxis, we then consider the potential for what Malin and Ryder (2018) calls a "deeply intersectional" framework that addresses "intersecting forms of structural environmental injustice and dominant ideologies that operate as classist, racist, sexist, nativist, ableist, homophobic, and anthropocentric matrices of domination" (p. 1). Whether or not the Green New Deal proposals are politically feasible amid the rise of Trump-styled right-wing populism, the urgency to address climate change compels social work practitioners, educators, and researchers to embrace Grace Lee Bogg's suggestion "not to continue in the same old way" but to embrace a vision of social work that is committed to restoring human well-being and the natural world.

A Green Response to the Global Economic Crises and Rising Populism

Proposals for a "Green New Deal" surfaced in the United Kingdom at the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008 which crippled the financial industry and led to a downturn in economies worldwide (Green New Deal Group, 2013). In response to austerity policies that cut spending on social services and welfare benefits, a coalition of labor unions, agriculture, industry, and environmentalists developed a legislative plan for the United Kingdom to regulate financial institutions and carbon emissions *and* invest in a "low-carbon" workforce (which includes social work). The Green New Deal Group (2013) envisions a revival of Keynesian economics across Europe through public investment in a "renewable energy revolution" which would create jobs and address pressing social and environmental problems. For former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, the urgency and broad scope of the Green New Deal has the potential to unite progressives across the European continent to oppose nationalist populist movements that are promoting racism, anti-immigration, and xenophobia (Taylor & Neslen, 2019).

In the United States, youth activists with the Sunrise Movement captured national attention with their November 13, 2019 demonstration outside Representative Nancy Pelosi's office. Garnering support from progressive Democratic leaders, they pressed upon the newly reelected Speaker of the House to create a Select Committee charged with drafting a Green New Deal for the United States. Drawing upon their personal experience with environmental disasters, these youths frame global warming as a local problem that requires a complete transformation in economic and environmental systems (Matthews, Bowlin, & Hulac, 2018). In response, Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Markey introduced House Resolution 109 and Senate Resolution 59, both of which address the causal relationship between global warming and intersecting social and environmental concerns. Among its many proposals, the U.S. Green New Deal includes a public health response to address emissions of sulfur oxide, mercury poisoning, and contaminated ground water from fracking; spending on infrastructure for subsidized low-carbon housing and housing for long-term care; and investing in care work through raising the minimum wage, debt forgiveness, immigration rights for migrants who perform care work, and universal childcare (Courage Coalition, 2019; Haviland, 2019).

In the Canadian context, The Leap Manifesto (2015) similarly builds upon a broad coalition of labor, environmental, grassroots faith-based, food and social justice groups who propose that,

Shifting to an economy in balance with the earth's limits also means expanding the sectors of our economy that are already low carbon: caregiving, teaching, social work, the arts and public-interest media. . . . All this work, much of it performed by women, is the glue that builds humane, resilient communities—and we will need our communities to be as strong as possible in the face of the rocky future we have already locked in (paragraph 14, emphasis added).

Coinciding with the Canadian government's recognition of the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples, the Leap Manifesto foregrounds Indigenous communities as "original caretakers" of the land, combining principles of gender equality, human rights, Indigenous sovereignty, and racial and environmental justice in its vision of a "caring economy" (Leap Manifesto, 2015). Through emphasizing "care work," the Leap Manifesto positions social work and other caring professions as part of a "low-carbon workforce" that contributes to a sustainable economy through addressing human welfare and redressing injustices associated with social, economic, and ecological harms of the global economy.

Even with the momentum behind Green New Deal plans, Naomi Klein (one of the authors of the Leap Manifesto) cautions us that sustained public support is integral to ensuring that all sectors of society work together to bring about meaningful social change (Wiener, 2019). Organizers with the Leap Manifesto operate through grassroots mobilization, hosting town halls but also encouraging local leaders and educators to raise awareness and integrate their views into the plan, including educator Rachel Boccio who works with imprisoned youth at the John R. Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire, Connecticut. Reflecting on a teach-in they organized with imprisoned youth, Boccio (2017) characterizes the Leap Manifesto as a "powerful pedagogical tool" for exploring "the urgency of the climate crises and the fundamentals of 21st century social justice activism." Following Boccio's example, what would it look like to marshal this vision for social and ecological change within social work education and practice?

Connecting Social Work to the Natural World

Since the 1970s, social workers engaging in environmental and sustainable social work have urged the profession to invest in "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Gray & Coates, 2012, p. 242, quoting World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Notwithstanding individual social workers who take part in environmental activism, however, the profession as a whole has been slow to attend to environmental crises and related social injustices (Dominelli, 2012; Jones, 2012). Cumby (2016) suggests that social work's Western orientation, which separates individuals (i.e., humans) from their natural environment, poses a significant ideological barrier for social workers to address climate change. Although Bronfenbrenner's person-in-environment framework borrows from ecology, its application in social work has been limited to theorizing individuals' dynamic relationships with larger social systems including the family, community, organizations, or politics (Norton, 2012). Gray and Coates (2012) argue that engaging with environmental ethics will require social work to evolve from its ontological and epistemological roots in the "modern, individualistic, and anthropocentric thinking" (p. 240) exemplified in the person-in-social environment paradigm.

Ecological approaches in social work emphasize how "environmental devastation of the *natural world* [will] impact deleteriously on ecological sustainability but also on people's psycho-social well-being" (Jones, 2012, p. 415). While social work is well-equipped to help people cope with climate change, Dominelli's (2012) plan for a Green Social Work calls for a structural approach.

Social workers can take part in examining and challenging social and political processes that produce environmental crises and injustice through global capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, and neocolonial power structures, including multinational corporations' ability to commodify the natural world for maximum profit. As with Canada's Leap Manifesto, Dominelli (2012) suggests learning from Indigenous ecological justice principles, such as those incorporated into the Bolivian conceptualization of "Rights of Mother Nature" or New Zealand's legal recognition of the rights of the Whanganui River (Jones, 2012, p. 1637).

Decolonizing Resistance to Global Capitalism and Climate Change

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg storyteller, scholar, and activist Leanne Simpson reminds us that decolonial resistance to global capitalism, patriarchy, and settler colonialism has been ongoing for centuries among Indigenous communities who have always fought back with their own ways of taking care of each other and the land (Simpson, 2017). Indigenous ecofeminist movements challenge the promise of global capitalism with epistemologies and practices that connect all aspects of life in the cosmos (Mies & Shiva, 1993/2014). Mies and Shiva (1993/2014) define an "ecofeminist perspective" as one that "recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love" (p. 6 quoted in Hunt, 2014, p. 236). Nobel Peace Prize Winner Wangari Muta Maathi exemplified this ethos through the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which brought attention to the links between gender oppression, poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation in Kenya (Gaard, 2017). Through training women to plant millions of trees, Hunt (2014) describes Green Belt Movements as a type of "praxis to resist environmental and political oppression through empowering rural women" (p. 235).

Based in India, activist and scholar Vanadana Shiva, similarly inspired a feminist anti-globalization movement through organizing against the genetically modified seed industry which has increased poverty among subsistence farmers in India who face increasing debt and contamination of ground and surface water. Shiva (1997) reminds us that the extensive reach of global capitalism extends centuries of colonial and imperial rule by commodifying all aspects of life and shifting local decision-making to global institutions that benefit a few. Shiva calls for resisting the disempowering ideology of the "global" through an ecological framework that connects "every act, every entity, with the largeness of the cosmic and planetary" and centers women's expertise and knowledge as essential to addressing today's ecological crises (Shiva, 1997, p. 3).

Lessons from these ecofeminist and decolonial practices (among many others) illustrate a path forward that does not center social work (a modernist profession) or Green New Deal packages that reify nation-state power over humanity and the land. As Simpson theorizes, Indigenous place-based solidarity, which she calls "grounded normativity," invokes a "system of ethics that are continuously generated by a relationship with a particular place, with land, through the Indigenous processes and knowledges that make up Indigenous life" (Simpson, 2016, p. 22). Following Simpson (2016), Indigenous social workers are well positioned to draw inspiration from everyday Indigenous practices, while nonIndigenous social workers can work in solidarity with Indigenous communities to respect Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous knowledges that decenter colonial systems, including emphasis on individualism and the nation-state.

Decolonial practices outlined by Simpson, Shiva, and Maathi may be at odds with social work's modernist roots. Ecofeminist and Indigenous principles that inform climate action and Green New Deal proposals, however, illuminate the transformative potential of dismantling existing political systems that maintain settler colonialism and its entanglement with white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist exploitation of human and natural resources.

A Green New Social Work

Where does this leave social work? Considering the rise of nationalist, populist views across the world (e.g., Modi's reelection as a Hindu right nationalist in India, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, and Jair Bolsonaro's election in Brazil), the viability of proposed Green New Deal plans depend on mass mobilization and coalition building among diverse groups. Social movement activists regularly struggle with maintaining momentum around shared goals without marginalizing people whose concerns are sidelined for more mainstream issues. Labor movement organizers in the United States, for example, endorsed a Green New Deal in part because of the emphasis on broad-based issues like raising the minimum age and universal childcare, as opposed to more divisive issues like opposition to the Keystone Pipeline which pitted Indigenous communities against white landowners.

As with previous social movements, social workers can work with communities to ensure that the Green New Deal and climate action centers the needs of those most marginalized by systemic colonialist, imperialist, racist, heteronormative, sexist, and ableist systems. This could include joining with prison abolitionists to fight for the decriminalization of Indigenous and environmental protesters; supporting youth environmental activists from the United States and Canada to work in solidarity with undocumented farm workers and their families for comprehensive immigration reform; and advocating for immigrant labor rights as integral to greening our food systems.

For social work to tackle the call for climate action we will need to (1) broaden our epistemological conceptualization of social justice to include Indigenous and ecological principles of interdependence and responsibility for caring for all our relations (human and nonhuman life); (2) embrace feminist praxis of care that centers connection, mutual empathy, and empowerment (Norton, 2012), and (3) develop a new narrative within social work, where contributing to a low-carbon future can bolster the profession's relevance in an emerging Green economy while transforming the profession's core values of promoting dignity, equality, and respect for all forms of life in a sustainable future.

Taking inspiration from Angela Davis's (2019) keynote address at the Society for Social Work Research's annual conference, "just because we cannot foresee a different future does not mean it is not possible."

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