



# Stan cox: the green new deal and beyond: ending the climate emergency while we still can

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Stan Cox's *The Green New Deal and Beyond* argues that the realities of our climate crisis require the elimination of fossil fuels from the U.S. economy and a realignment of the unjust system that allows for their exploitation. Cox's thesis is that the Green New Deal legislation (GND) is a good first step, but we in the U.S. must also acknowledge and adhere to the limits of economic growth and material consumption. His evidence-driven analysis builds from the IPCC report's finding that we need to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 if we are to limit global warming to 1.5 °C.

Cox supports his argument in three major ways. First, he walks through the history of growth and limits from 1933 to the present, with special emphasis on 2016–2020. Second, he explains why limits are inescapable and how to achieve them through a plan called “cap-and-adapt.” Finally, Cox argues that any realignment must correct the social inequalities endured by lower- and middle- classes and the Global South.

Initially, to ground the history of limits, Cox discusses the 1933 New Deal, resulting labor movement, and WWII rationing—examples where the Federal Government stepped in to stimulate the economy and impose limits. Cox then reminds us of the 1972 book, *The Limits to Growth*, highlighting its relevance for today. For instance, the books says “when we introduce technological developments that successfully lift some restraint to growth or avoid some collapse, the system simply grows to another limit, temporarily surpasses it, and falls back” (p. 19) and “if you follow those ascending business-as-usual curves to which the world is still adhering out to the year 2030, they show industrial and food production peaking out and then collapsing” (p. 20). What was true fifty years ago is true today: Technology must

adhere to limits, entropy will always prevail, and industrial food production is unsustainable in the long run.

Cox goes on to explain the political pinball that ensued in response to the energy crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, including President Carter's attempt to decrease reliance on foreign oil and President Reagan's National Energy Plan and initiation of federal subsidies for fossil fuel expansion. As Cox ventures into the 1990s and 2000s, he lays out major environmental and political milestones, and concludes each with the U.S. gross domestic product and CO<sub>2</sub> ppm emissions at that point in time (e.g. 1992 Rio Earth Summit: \$6.5 trillion (T), 356 ppm; 1997 Kyoto Protocol: \$8.6 T, 2008 U.N. Green New Deal: \$14.7 T, 385 ppm; 2015 Paris Agreement: \$18.2 T, 400 ppm). Cox's parallelism and juxtaposition make the point that no matter the political or social milestone, a rise in GDP, buttressed by unrestrained energy and material consumption (sans unrealistic decoupling), directly correlates with a rise in global emissions.

This historical overview leads Cox into his second main point, that U.S. climate policies must work within limits. He begins by examining popular fixes—including carbon capture and storage, nuclear energy, and claims of 100 percent renewables—and performing a reality check by citing leading research that counters these fixes. In many cases, we do not see their purported benefits because we gloss over key assumptions, such as the embodied energy and extraction required by the steps leading up to the fix. For instance, consider electric car batteries, direct-air capture, and wind machines. Simple calculations reveal the required energy that goes into growing, transporting, and processing cancels out a majority of gained benefits. Cox's demystification supports his book's hard-to-swallow maxim: We must adhere to ecological limits if we are to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

Achieving this begins with asking the right questions, Cox asserts. Not about what works best in economic models, or what is politically viable, but what ecology *requires of us*. Once we ask that question we can go on an “energy diet” (p.

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84). Similar to weight loss, there are no quick fixes besides healthy diet and exercise. Cox provides individual actions we should take. These include eating local, eating less meat, and traveling and commuting less. *Less*. As Cox acknowledges, we have long known these will alleviate emissions, but most still avoid them because we “don’t want to think or talk about using less energy” (p. 71).

Alongside individual change must come systemic change. After once again debunking unrealistic proposals, *à la* “Eco-modernism” and “Climate Keynesianism,” Cox introduces a “Cap-and-Adapt” proposal (p. 97). Called a policy “suggestion,” it would place annual, mandatory reductions on fossil fuels themselves, not just carbon or carbon equivalent emitted, thereby capping extraction. To enforce, the government would issue permits, and all imports and exports would be banned. For this suggestion to become policy, a “Coxian” cohort would need to develop a more detailed framework, write the bill, model the legislation’s effects, and collect support statements from influential climate change leaders, economists, and politicians.

As Cox has written elsewhere, “Cap-and-Adapt” aims to turn the “Green New Deal” into the “*New* Green Deal” (NGD). The switch is not simply semantic. GND relies on “malignant” “green growth” (Cox 2019) that could promulgate technological dependence (e.g. “slapping solar panels on top of Walmart”) and allow the rich to profit from new “green” technologies. In contrast, NGD would ensure that any regulation put green first.

Here is where Cox’s third point resides. Any proposal must address the growing economic inequality, domestically and abroad: “If we manage to achieve a fair, effective climate-emergency policy, the 33 percent of American

households with highest incomes [> \$95,000 annually] will most likely bear the greatest economic burden” (p. 109). The poorest parts of the world in the Global South are responsible for only 15 percent of global greenhouse emissions, yet they are subjected to climate change’s worst impacts.

As evidenced by COVID-19 and climate change, we live in a material world. Cox reminds us that no frame, optimism, or flashy proposal will change that fact, and that no technology, market-based policy, or economic growth will save us from the burden of limits. Driving each of Cox’s paragraphs is a wide-eyed urgency, best summarized by the book’s subtitle. We do not have much time left to take the “off ramp” (p. 83), and while most people ho-hum around, Cox is busy laying out what it will take to ward off climate catastrophe, “while we still can.”

## Reference

Cox, Stan. 2019. “That green growth at the heart of the Green New Deal? It’s malignant. Counterpunch. of 2020<https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/01/17/that-green-growth-at-the-heart-of-the-green-new-deal-its-malignant/>. Accessed 2 May 2019.

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