

Book review

Planet on Fire: A Manifesto for the Age of Environmental Breakdown

Mathew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton
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In this powerful and uncompromising vision, Mathew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton take on what they see as the systemic factors leading societies into an age of upheaval. A uniquely stable era of the Earth's natural history, an era in which human societies have been able to flourish, is now over. Ours is the age of environmental breakdown, which will increasingly disrupt our ways of life, leading to famine, drought, disease, war and migration. These "morbid symptoms", the authors argue, are just the latest expression of an exploitative and extractive system, centuries old and traceable back to colonialism.

Whilst the hour is late, they contend that taking action to make the necessary reforms to our societal systems is still possible. To address the root causes of our predicament we need to talk about power, democracy and ownership, and to rethink dominant, false narratives about the human story. We need to rewire social institutions to untap human flourishing and avert a planet on fire.

This book offers a digestible, well-researched and passionate examination of the institutions and systems which shape our societies – employment, ownership, consumption, democracy – and shows why they must be reformed. The themes explored are themselves not new but are rather a synthesis of ideas for policy reforms which have become well-established in debates on the left over the past decade or so. Recognisable influences include rethinking the logic of economic growth, taking on rentierism, devolving power to local government, safeguarding the 'foundational economy', orienting public purpose towards realising societal missions, and reforming welfare support to ensure decent incomes for all.

The main achievement of the book is to weave together these complementary ideas into a well-rounded vision, or 'manifesto', for transforming societies' institutions to become compatible with a world not on fire. As such, this serves as a great introduction for readers not already immersed in such debates. It will stimulate a cross-fertilisation of ideas for those who are.

The reader would do well to be familiar with some key concepts that go assumed – economic rents, secular stagnation, use versus exchange value, amongst others. Otherwise, this is a very readable and flowing text, with an impressive range of topics covered in its 252 pages.

The book begins with a compelling illustration of how dominant narratives can teach us the wrong lessons from history. Here their seed is planted: environmental and human suffering are inevitable outcomes of an exploitative economic paradigm which exists due to vastly unequal power relations. This moulds the institutions which govern our lives: from finance to company ownership, land rights to labour markets. Two caricatured future scenarios are constructed. The first is status-quoism, in which failed tinkering of extant economic institutions and a retreat of liberal global society towards militarised borders and ‘ethno-nationalist’ rhetoric coincides with a burning planet. The alternative frames the authors’ manifesto: an ‘eco-socialist’ global society in which re-purposed economic institutions, deeper democracy, animated local governance and porous borders insure against an unpredictable future.

The middle chapters take on, theme-by-theme, the reforms the authors deem necessary to avert crisis. They summon compelling case study material to furnish an introduction to each topic. The modern corporation, for example, is at once the battering ram of reckless capitalism and an astonishing expression of human co-operation and envisioning. The baby ought not be thrown out with the bathwater.

While most of the pages are devoted to constructing their ‘eco-socialist’ vision – dealing in ‘what’ and ‘why’ – the authors afford some space towards the end to address how this vision can be argued for and delivered. Finally, the book’s crescendo is their coalesced 10-point manifesto, a jigsaw completed by piecing together the conclusions and recommendations emanating from each chapter.

Planet on Fire is nothing if not uncompromising. According to the authors, the writing is on the wall: we’re looking down the barrel towards environmental breakdown. There’s no time for tinkering, incrementalism or indecision. A sober interrogation of the root causes of our current crises primes an analysis of what is required for a safe planet and society, rather than what is politically palatable. They must know many will balk at the prospect of energised central and local government, a step-change in green policy and reconstituted ownership models. Yet readers of a different political hue are unlikely to pick this book up at all; less likely still to tolerate its steadfast socialist vision.

Whilst there is no shortage of ideas across an impressive range of topics – from financial reforms to worker control of businesses – sometimes the proposed solutions appear incommensurate with the colossal challenges. It feels a stretch, for example, to propose small-scale indigenous land rights reforms as a fix for Amazonian deforestation. At times, breadth wins out over depth. Bold reforms are offered for topics whose examination in the book feels rather superficial, for example global agriculture and welfare systems. Likely a sign of over-ambition for a relatively short volume, its deluge of ideas can make prioritisation a struggle. Some prescriptions seem to occupy space through their pedigree as policy reforms on the left, despite a tenuous link to the book’s central mission. How essential, for example, is establishing a digital commons for averting environmental breakdown?

Again, perhaps owing to lack of space, alternative perspectives remain unexplored. It is taken as given, for example, that government’s display of heft in the era of Coronavirus has imprinted positively in the national psyche; that the taste of social need winning over market norm will be savoured. Another take is that an imposing government has tried the patience of abiding citizens and haunted politicians. Brexit and Coronavirus may have taken the shine off transformational agendas and looming government,

respectively. A significant and laudable thread running through the book is the need for deeper democracy throughout society, for the balance of power to be redressed towards people and communities. It is assumed to be self-evident that herein lies the path away from a planet on fire; that given the choice, people prioritise environmental resilience over competing agendas. Is this unambiguously the case? Decades of sclerotic responses from democratic nations in the face of well-known global environmental challenges might suggest otherwise.

Whilst the book is not a work of political strategy, the authors briefly outline a winning formula: powerful narratives, incessant opposition and political ingenuity. Consistent with their vision of an empowered global citizenry, they recognise that such a package of reforms as expounded in this book must be willed into existence by winning the arguments of the day. One thing they excel at is emphasising the art of the possible: sprinkled throughout are examples of how people have won power for their communities and environment when both have been threatened.

The authors have constructed a vision for transforming economic and political structures to bring about a global society consistent with ecological and human thriving. There is a healthier, fulfilling, participatory, safer future. Alchemic political strategy is now needed to lift their manifesto from these pages into the real world.

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