My colleague Bentley Allan put together an excellent dialogue, on the Green New Deal, on Thursday. I wrote up some thoughts, initially sent around via email, on what I learned. This report outlines a few key lessons I gleaned from the day, and poses some unanswered questions. It’s not meant to be a comprehensive record, just some observations from a particular vantage point—I study the historical development of American political parties and social movements—to continue a valuable conversation.

First, what I learned on the science/technology. We have had energy transitions before, but they’ve been basically accidental, because new technology came to market. This is the first planned energy transition ever. And we don’t have much time! Though a decade ago, there was talk of a Green Manhattan Project, we now have to act, and act now, given the imminence of catastrophe. So while there was, see below, plenty of talk about sequencing reforms, John Zysman (Political Science, Berkeley) worried that “If we had thirty years, I’m confident we’d get this right. But we have ten.” The goal, someone said, is not to shift the Overton Window, it’s to decarbonize the economy. And it’s not enough to say, “Keep the oil in the ground.” We have to build a decarbonized world. Otherwise, we are left to what Daniel Aldana Cohen (Sociology, Penn) summoned up apocalyptically as “eco-apartheid and climate genocide.”

A big lesson: focus on the electrical grid. Zysman took as his mantra to “electrify everything and decarbonize electricity,” and that message carried through the day. That means huge investment in building wind turbines in the middle of the country, where the wind blows, and then in transmission capacity to the coasts, where people live. It means integrating regional grids much more completely into national power generation; Daniel Aldana Cohen (Sociology, Penn) mentioned Brazil, with its hydro, as the only peer. It means a huge program of building transmission lines, which are super-expensive to bury. And it means serious R&D into electricity storage, where the technology isn’t yet up-to-snuff, because wind blows at night and power demand peaks during the day.

Lizabeth Cohen (History, Harvard) used her first book, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge, 1990), to offer lessons from the New Deal for the Green New Deal. Above all, she underlined, which panelists took to heart, the improvisational character of the New Deal, that FDR did not have a master plan but expanded what worked and dropped what didn’t. As he said in 1932, “bold persistent experimentation.” Which theme dovetailed with the idea that we don’t really know what will work at scale, we have to find out fast, and that ideas should be tried precisely as experiments, with the understanding that there will be failures. Especially in states and cities, the mission is to be Brandeisian laboratories of reform rather than the simple implementers of Bloombergian best practices.

On the politics: L. Cohen told the New Deal as a story that balanced radicalism and pragmatism, both at the national level in the infamous deals with Southern power and northern machines, and also in the neighborhoods and on the shop floor as Communists and Socialists adopted “a
grievance approach to their organizing” in which working-class Chicagoans found their voice as Democrats and trade unionists without embracing the full suite of radicalism. In the same vein if more pessimistically, Zysman talked about the tension between the dynamics of mobilization, naming clear villains and drawing sharp distinctions, and the complexities of coalition-building, which involves making deals with some of those very same distasteful actors.

Movements, in other words, need their radicals and their pragmatists. A questioner from the Sunrise Movement outlined their strategy of protests and sit-ins. L. Cohen emphasized mobilizing people embedded in institutions, not just as individual isolates, which is harder now that so many of those face-to-face intermediary institutions have ebbed. Need to think through who and how. Leah Stokes (Political Science, UCSB) talked smartly about changing the incentives for politicians. Green voters and sectors have to lobby, donate, and, if need be, threaten primary challenges. Complementary to that, some talk, with examples from California, about how investments in climate-impacted communities has led to good policy feedbacks, though would have liked more specifics. In particular, need to think more about the special dynamics of building cross-race, cross-class, and cross-place coalitions.

Cara Horowitz (Law, UCLA) gave an excellent presentation on legal challenges. Domestically, a Green New Deal will substantially expand the administrative state, and face major pushback on constitutional and statutory grounds. On the former, she noted that various pieces of the AOC-Markey draft outline will have commerce clause problems (building codes, local land use) and takings clause problems (fracking bans). States’ rights problems will be endemic no matter what. On the statutory side, she emphasized firm, ambitious deadlines, enforceable in court, with rights of action, and clear textual delegation of power from Congress. She emphasized that the agency will be sued for both overreach and underreach. She encouraged alternatives to command-and-control regulation (public-private partnerships, incentives, etc.) as less likely to run into legal trouble. Finally, there are big issues with international trade law; WTO rules limit border adjustments for environmental or labor standards. (Horowitz seemed to indicate her preference for a new centralized Green New Deal agency. I would have liked discussion.)

We sped past the core point that only Democrats will vote for a Green New Deal. No talk whatsoever of appealing to Republicans! There will be no grand Green New Deal bargain. And the moderates in the room were notably hewing to a small, pragmatic rather than a high-technocratic line. Talk of how Waxman-Markey in 2009 didn’t do that. Wonder what would have happened with more economists.

There will be winners and losers. This is a politics of concentrated costs and diffuse benefits, and of immediate losses and long-term gains. It’s a bad mix. And, as Stokes hammered home, the other side knows how to play to win! The presentations on political economy paid a great deal of attention to sequence. They offered general agreement that, at least for now (i.e., in opposition), the Green New Deal’s most divisive issues, like what to do with nuclear, should remain in abeyance. Nina Kelsey (International Affairs, GW) gave the optimistic take: seeding interest groups will create “green spirals.” Better, for her, to change the rules across a multiround game. Start with R&D, subsidies for high-employment service industries (retrofitting homes, stopping gas leaks) as a means to reducing barriers to stronger climate policy and seeding a bureaucracy. Help the highly fragmented solar industry to consolidate and advocate for itself (they punch even
below their modest weight, while Edison Electric Institute and American Petroleum Institute know what they’re doing). In the same vein, David Hart (Policy, George Mason) talked about “building a new system that exerts a pole of attraction on the old.” There was some pushback, which I share, against that kind of step-by-step incremental strategy. Windows for big change open and close quickly in US national politics. We didn’t get national health insurance in 1935, and we’ve never had the chance again.

Jonas Nahm (Energy, Resources, and Environment, SAIS), emphasized the importance, in combating a global problem, of global supply chains, and in particular of avoiding the “manufacturing trap.” China makes cheap solar panels. The US jobs will come in services, and we shouldn’t pretend otherwise. Relatedly, lots of talk (histories of the rise of industrial capitalism in the 1880s tell a similar story) about the need for standardization of products, especially in solar. Zysman mentioned procurement and the McKinsey-style consultancies that regularly rework corporate processes as sites where companies can change their practices. Some tension between these folks and the radicals, including D.A. Cohen out of a left tradition emphasizing the redistribution of power and public provision, and Myles Lennon (Brown, Anthropology), who talked, interestingly if speculatively, about “decolonizing climate” to get us out of the intersecting structures of racism and patriarchy imbricated in global supply chains.

There was talk about exactly how to make allies with existing players even as they may not be players forever. What about electric chargers at, to use an anachronism made new, filling stations? And lots of talk about labor, where the building trades have been hostile, and agreement that nothing serious passes or gets implemented without them on board. The twin strategies were working closely with sympathetic unions in the public and service sectors (mostly NOT white men) and large direct payoffs to the unions in carbon-intensive sectors (mostly white men, “labor aristocrats” in the old jargon). My thought is that union fights are jurisdictional fights, and figuring out which unions get to organize which green jobs will be key. Things like project labor agreements in contracts for retrofitting.

A New Deal analogy occurred to me. Thomas Ferguson (UMass Boston) wrote back in the ‘80s about how the New Deal broke the dominant bloc of the ancien régime, centered around the House of Morgan, and made tactical alliance with dissident blocs, especially the Rockefeller interests. Exxon-Mobil plays the House of Morgan. There was a nice niche example of a Danish company (Ørstad) going from natural gas to wind, but can anyone play Rockefeller at scale at still allow us to decarbonize? If not, then what?

Three big questions coming out of the day. First, who pays and who funds? The logic of the Green New Deal, that simply putting a price on carbon is insufficient, commanded broad consensus. There was, nonetheless, general agreement that a carbon tax should be part of a climate solution, but that visible costs paid by carbon-dependent populations raise the specter of reaction far beyond the scale of the gilet jaunes. The day had very little talk (no macroeconomists!) of taxes, deficits, etc. Nahm talked about emphasizing the pieces that get coded by the public as benefits, even if they impose costs, which seems right. On all these issues, we saw the differences in emphasis you’d expect, though no fireworks, between people with technocratic climate backgrounds and social justice backgrounds.
As a corollary, what is the role for private capital, both in R&D and in implementation? Private equity has inserted itself up and down the supply chain; it’s not just VCs in the Valley looking for solar. How, to ask a question of my own, are we to think through the fraught dynamics of financialization in the Green New Deal?

Second, what role for states and municipalities? How, more generally, to take advantage of the opportunities as well as the perils in federalism? The question poses itself inside and around the Green New Deal. Should dollars go, as in bits of the Great Society, straight to cities? The 1930s saw Little New Deals in the states (Pennsylvania was a notable example). What is a Little Green New Deal? Two themes came through: the relative success of California, and the need to center climate-impacted communities. Another theme is the tension between community control and the enormous need to change the built environment as we decarbonize. That means serious zoning changes, and power generation and transmission. As D.A. Cohen asked, “Will carbon transition die in the NIMBY trenches?”

Finally, the biggest missing piece, for federal legislation and then to catalyze states and cities, was Congress. Much talk of romancing interest groups, but less than I would have liked about how those coalitions will get moderate Democrats on board, which is the proximate legislative problem. Assume unified Democratic control for a Green New Deal. But in 2021 or 2025, the best outcome for a median senator is someone like Kyrsten Sinema or Tom Carper. Obviously, that will mean killing the legislative filibuster. More generally, what kinds of tactics and formulas will persuade them to support a Green New Deal? That’s a nice way of saying, what are their red lines, and what goodies will they demand? What kinds of compromises will and will not destroy the coalition or threaten the planet? How does that high politics fit into the broader strategy?

The great what-if here, a signal failure of the Obama years, is if the Senate had killed the filibuster in 2009. I made that point to D.A. Cohen. “Yeah,” he replied. “They f-----d it up.” And so the central irony, resonant with so much in our politics, that we—Democrats, liberals, the left, what have you—are finding our voice just as specters of doom grow ever nearer.

On the party politics: I’m of two minds. Some part of me thinks a politics that begins to organize around climate, marked by the sharp cohort distinctions that now define American elections, will move Democrats beyond the Sanders-Warren return of the old-time religion, to the spark of a new party project. Still, to return to Liz Cohen, the Green New Deal proposes that the federal government may yet embed itself in communities across the land (visit livingnewdeal.org), tame the hazards and vicissitudes of life, and so, perhaps, benefit the party that enacted it, and restore some trust in government to do big things. Though the New Deal generation may be in the great Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the sky, the New Deal vision and political formula may, let us hope, have some life in it yet.