

# GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

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GREEN POLITICS IN EUROPE AND BEYOND



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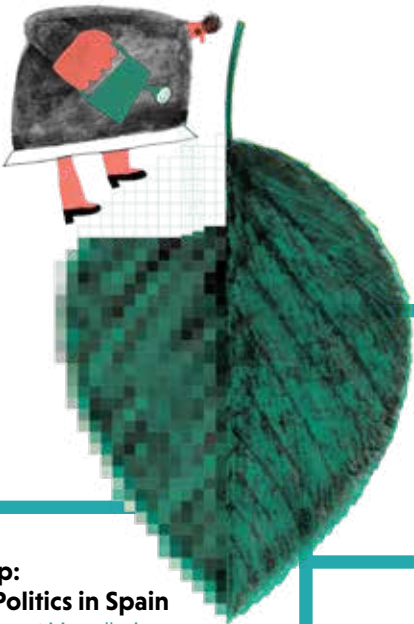
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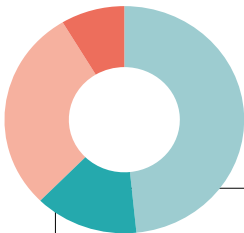
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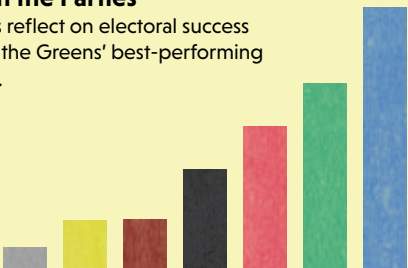
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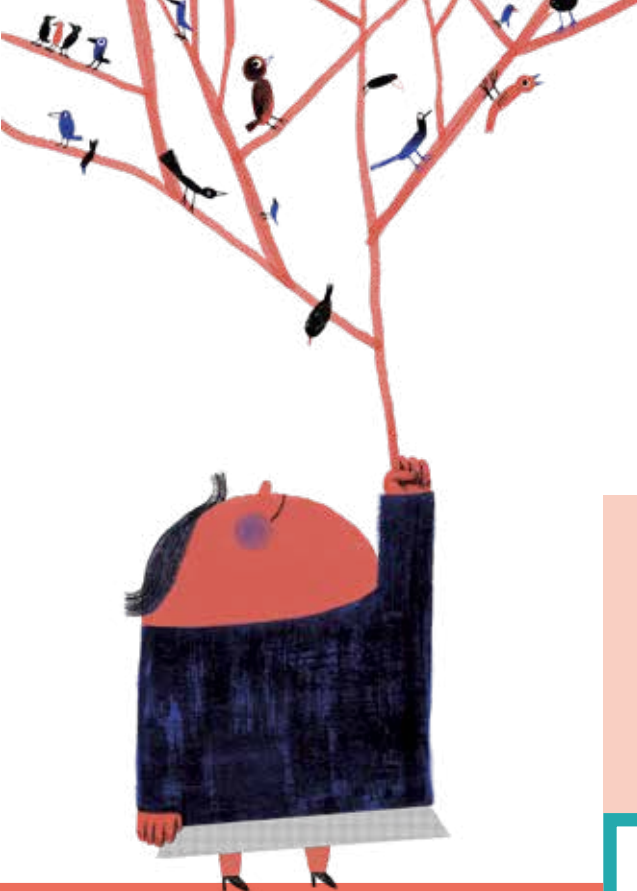
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## FACING OUR FUTURE

BY LAURENT STANDAERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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**T**he 2020s have begun with images of the planet in flames, from the Amazon to Australia. Never before has so much CO<sub>2</sub> been emitted, so many natural resources extracted, and so many species endangered. The withdrawal of the United States under the Trump presidency signals a new climate regime. Today, ecology is at the base, shaping the contours of political divides. The climate imperative demands an alternative system of consumption and production, and a new way of governing human societies and their ecosystems.

Since their emergence in the early 1980s through their strengthening in the late 1990s, only Green parties have brought the impetus for such reform to the public sphere, a “politics of civilisation” in the strongest sense of the term. Seen from 2020, the early indications that spurred their foundation – from *The Limits to Growth* report to the 1970s’ oil crises and the first cracks in the Western production-obsessed model – have become distress calls. It is questionable whether Western modernity can understand, let alone resolve, the link between three centuries of linear material progress and irreparable damage to earth systems. The model is trapped by its own immutable cleavages: nature versus culture; individual versus collective; environmental versus social; and national versus planetary.

# D R I A L

Yet a page has turned and a historic moment is before us. The advent of scientific rationalism and the Enlightenment brought centuries of industry and iron. Socialist, conservative and liberal strands of thought are all facets of that modern project, sharing an often blind faith in technology and affording the human the same absolute centrality. Political ecology, on the other hand, is built on and at the limits of that project. Without abandoning the values of humanism, it fully and sustainably takes the planet into account. A tradition notable for its lack of canon, political ecology's diversity is both a strength and a weakness. Unbounded, it surges forth like a river, evolving and drawing from different realities on the ground, the many tributaries feeding its relevance and sensitivity. The common thread is a concern for the living world. In this edition, the *Green European Journal* explores this strength and uniqueness by delving into the evolving and multiple worlds of political ecology.

Today, Green parties are met by other forces on their own ground. The ecological emergency is recognised across the political spectrum, whose many shades of green pose new problems and opportunities. Two tendencies emerge as challenges for progressive Green parties. On the one hand, a diluted environmentalism in the guise of green growth that maintains the socially unjust status quo. On the other, a populist and authoritarian wave that feeds off inequality and injustice to offer a great leap backwards to the reassurance of past certainties.

So, what is to be done? Built in opposition to the neoliberal dismantlement of society, Green parties must now pivot to become central players, capable of governing and taking the initiative. The first task will be leaving the comfort zone of opposition and the politics of electoral niches behind without compromising on their values. The second will be reaching beyond the middle class and broadening their appeal across society. Addressing geographic inequalities and healing the painful urban-rural divides feeding the resentments exploited by the far right offers a clear path to do so. The third will be building a strong and inclusive narrative that can rise above past political squabbles. The undertaking goes beyond



# EDITO

questioning the orthodoxies of post-war industrial society: it is about redefining the conditions for progress, to move from a conception based on capitalist and patriarchal domination – if mitigated for a short while by the welfare state – to a vision of non-material freedom, social justice, and abundance.

The groundwork will have to be laid away from the electoral cycle. The fundamental question posed by green intellectuals and activists, from Gorz to Starhawk, from Jonas to Klein, requires an answer. What world do we want? The priorities will change based on where you are, but the goals are the same: taking on a destructive economic model that generates social and environmental inequality; making nature an absolute value rather than an external constraint; revitalising democracy as a shared project; rethinking the market and the state; reconnecting public institutions to society; and a constructive approach towards technology. Getting there will mean thinking about the Green narrative and leadership strategically, as well as understanding how, rather than dispersing forces, different movements (even the most unruly) contribute to shifting the Overton window of what is politically possible.

Recognising the pertinent level for both action and thought is essential for political ecology. Despite its current limitations, Europe remains the most appropriate scale. The principles that inspired European integration are fundamental to green thinking: reconciliation, cooperation, sharing, and looking beyond short-term interests. That said, defence of this framework does not imply defending its institutions and their political agenda. While European institutions and their supporters are trumpeting the European Green Deal as a solution to the climate crisis, only Greens are proposing anything that goes beyond this belated attempt at greenwashing. But calling for an ecological transition will lead nowhere unless it is tied to a real industrial and geo-economic response. At a time of fundamental global shifts – seen in the trajectories of the United States and China – and political alliances based on fossil fuels and emissions – as in Australia and Brazil – the Greens are the alternative almost by default.



# ORIAL

Finally, to make the 2020s the decade of transition, Greens must fight an internal battle against the complacency of institutional success and the temptation to confuse cultural hegemony with electoral gains. Otherwise, the 2019 “green wave” will be limited to the few countries with a functioning green party. In southern and eastern Europe, people are environmentally aware. But the voices of environmentalism express themselves in their own manner, and according to their own reality, be it through the libertarianism of pirate parties, the urban movements of Mediterranean cities, or community-level cooperatives and commons. For Greens, there is much to learn from the many worlds of political ecology.

The challenges are immense, as is the responsibility. The climate imperative and the reality that it dictates require a political DNA that is fundamentally different from that of traditional parties. A DNA rooted in the 21st century. Time is running out, but political ecology has the answers. A different world, a good life for all.



# THE THREE TRIBES OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY

ARTICLE BY

**PIERRE CHARBONNIER**

Humanity's collective relationship with nature has always provided political ecology with a material basis for reading history. The breakdown of that relationship is making this reading all the more relevant. Philosopher Pierre Charbonnier presents the three forces leading political ecology today – green socialism, the radical critics of modernity, and elite technocracy. While their diagnoses differ fundamentally, much is resting on them getting along.

**T**he decade that ended in 2020 was the decade of global climate inaction. Without a doubt, our inability to transform our economic systems into models compatible with planetary boundaries will define the beginning of the 21st century.



This article is available in its original language (French) on the *Green European Journal* website

**LES TROIS TRIBUS DE L'ÉCOLOGIE POLITIQUE**

Un appel à la convergence des luttes entre les trois tribus – les naturalistes, les radicaux et les technocrates.

This failure can be explained by the chasm that has opened between existing political structures, geared to competitiveness and productivity in the name of jobs, and the environmental and climate imperatives determined by Earth system science. Overlooking the negative externalities of the cheap energy that allows global supply chains to function is nowadays impossible. More radically, the economic effort that seeks to answer our demands for social justice and material wellbeing threatens these same objectives. Our era is marked by the disconnect between what we have inherited and what we see, somewhat stunned, on the horizon.

Today, we find ourselves prisoners of technical and ideological systems passed down from a largely destroyed world characterised by a stable climate and the cornucopian ideal. The world we are going to live in, which we already are living in, has different physical characteristics to

that of previous generations, yet much of the thinking informing politics still stems from that lost world. In particular, the current system of property rights and the quest for productivity gains are relics of an already distant past. Contemporary subjectivities, encapsulated in the domestic sphere and driven by technologies of individual mobility, appear strangely distant from the imperatives and possibilities of the present. The world born of this modern project has also made large parts of that very project obsolete.

Part of the problem is that we overestimate how much we depend on these ways of thinking and acting. History teaches that growth-based societies are not built without conflict, that they are the product of a fragile accommodation between science, technology, and politics and that these always contain elements of a counter-movement. The inertia of large technical systems and ideals of progress should not be confused with inevitability: our relationship with the future and the tools at hand can be re-examined.

One of the difficulties, both politically and intellectually, is determining exactly what we have inherited, what we should keep, and what we should discard or reject. The answer depends on your starting point. For that reason, political ecology is closely associated with thinking about time, because the climate crisis completely turns our political time horizon on its head.

## PLACING OUR PREDICAMENT

At least three timescales are relevant to thinking about the political task at hand. Over the long term, the greening of societies can be understood as a subversion of the structures that shape our collective relationship with nature. According to that time frame, the goal is to return to the roots of the modern project and renegotiate our relationship with the living and our place in the world. Over the medium term, the timescale defined by industrial capitalism and its critiques, political ecology can be seen as a renewed call for social justice based on the disciplining of capital. And, finally, over the short term, the timescale of the post-war Great Acceleration, or even Asia's economic catch-up, a more technocratic view essentially sees it as a question of ending global superpowers' escalating use of fossil fuels by financing a decarbonised productive sector.

Depending on the scale used, different political imaginaries, different levers for change, and different movements emerge. The success of the great green transformation depends on an alliance between these three projects and their ability not to hold each other in contempt.

The intermediate phase probably holds centre stage today. The main ideological thrust for building political ecology now comes from the traditional left, with its roots in the labour movement and its need for a new rallying call after the failure of left-populism.

Various versions of the Green New Deal form the common foundation for a coordinated welfare state response to the environmental imperative. Behind the Green New Deal lies the idea that the power of capital can only be limited by the intervention of a government attentive to demands for equality, and that these demands are inseparable from curbing the fossil fuel economy. Just as the ills of industrial development were met with labour law and social protection, today's socialist programme must address environmental ills.

As recently outlined in the manifesto *A Planet to Win*, the marriage of environmentalism and socialism relies on reactivating the traditional language of class struggle. Its central tenet is that growing economic insecurity goes hand in hand with growing environmental insecurity and that conflicts around social inequality will eventually become environmental conflicts too. In a period when working-class electorates have been won over by the conservative neoliberalism of Trump and the Brexiteers, who successfully hacked the narrative of protection and community (now associated with identity), the challenge is to win back the political imaginary of that social class. It is clear how this strategy is born of the industrial legacy of the 19th century: deeply constrained by its past faith in growth and technological development, social justice now depends on a system reset and, through a job guarantee, the end of the employment blackmail by economic elites.

Green socialism now appears to be the most credible platform in the US and is starting to gain traction in Europe. It has two main limitations. First, it is largely based on a form of statism. Once passed on to the state via the ballot box, demands for environmental justice are addressed by regulation and redirecting investment. Besides the fact that resistance within the state apparatus to such transformations should not be underestimated, nor should the flight of private capital, this political imaginary is one of total mobilisation, as usually used in wartime. In other words, it implies a declaration of war against an enemy who we are not sure is domestic (fossil fuel capital) or foreign (petrostates, like Saudi Arabia) – a declaration of war that entails a foreign policy. The second drawback to green socialism is that, just as the post-war welfare state, it would rest on the privileged position of the Global North over the South, which lacks the means to finance such an energy transition but will be hit hardest by the climate crisis.

Statism and the (relative) lack of global thinking are two aspects of green socialism that arouse criticism and distrust from the second ecological project. This stems from thinking that purports to be more radical when it comes to the relationship between nature and society and intends to tear down the structures that reduced the environment to a productive partner. The timescale here is not that of industrial society's crises but scientific modernity, or the disenchantment of the world. It dates back to

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at least the 16th century, a period of scientific revolutions in astronomy and physics that established the centrality of human reason in the cosmos, and a period of great discoveries that became the basis for Western domination over the rest of the world. This critique is shared by many, including strands of thought that are geographically and culturally peripheral, such as those of Amazonian, Arctic, and Native American communities whose social relationships with the living world cannot simply be reduced to appropriation and exploitation. But it also comes from movements born of modernity who want to break with dominant paradigms. Regional fightbacks against a state sovereignty generally subservient to the goal of growth echo this fundamental questioning of modern history. In France, the ZAD (*zone à défendre* – zone to defend) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a longstanding but now dismantled protest camp against the building of a redundant airport, has come to symbolise a connection with the land based on the radical autonomy of its users and guardians. These movements are turning against sovereignty, property, and extraction, all different components of the modernist matrix.

The strength of these movements, their radicalism, is also their weakness. They reclaim islands of autonomy one after the other and bet on a slow cultural and legal paradigm shift. They are expensive in terms of personal investment and generally inaccessible to those

who, out of necessity, must seek work in today's overly competitive labour market

and cannot risk leaving the structures of the welfare state behind. Placing this fight on a metaphysical plane means placing it within the long time frame that brackets the structures of human and ecological co-existence. Each type of critique has its own speed and rhythm, and this particular critique appears extremely slow in light of the deadline set by climate science.

Finally, a third sphere of mobilisation is based on a seemingly less radical, but much faster, environmental praxis. It is possible to view the climate deadlock not as the consequence of a deep and long process going back to the founding of modern cosmology, nor even as the consequence of industrialisation in general, but as the result of the Great Acceleration. That is to say, as a later phenomenon bringing together the energy abundance of oil, the construction of a technosphere based on individual mobility and mass consumption, and welfare-state institutions founded on GDP growth and its measurement. The physical characteristics – the pipelines, airports, and real estate – of this acceleration mean that it is controlled by a technological and economic elite concentrated in a small number of companies, especially in the energy and agri-food industries, and in a handful of seats of power and knowledge, most notably the supranational regulatory bodies that shape the free market, as well as, of course, the main sovereign geopolitical players.

## WHILE THE IRON'S HOT

What the climate movement has revealed is that these decision-making structures are extremely powerful, yet much more vulnerable than we think. Effective divestment campaigns targeting the most destructive sectors, particularly if taken up by central banks, could paralyse the structures of fossil capitalism, and with them the inefficient and unequal supply chains that govern our existence. The empowerment of civil servants and civil engineers freed from budgetary pseudo-constraints to drive the environmental transition of cities, transport systems, and housing infrastructure would go in the same direction. Shaping a new art of government uncorrupted by the demands of growth and supported by expertise appears as a most reasonable goal. All this sounds less romantic than idealistic calls for civilisational shifts and unconditional generosity towards a revitalised natural world. The test of power will be the obligatory next step, one that will probably be less exciting than the foundation of a renewed cultural paradigm, but surely quicker to implement.

This new green elite does not recruit the same type of people as the other two movements described above. Yet it is clear that there is animosity, real or imagined, between the post-colonial autonomist utopians, the eco-Jacobins of the Green New Deal, and these champions of the technocratic revolution. From a theoretical perspective, we might insist that each problem

be addressed on an appropriate timescale, be it that of the cosmological structures of modernity, the ills of industrialisation, or the Great Acceleration. But just as these three underlying historiographical assumptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, neither are the three critical counter-movements and the forces driving them necessarily destined for rivalry. They must learn to win each other over and establish common ground on which to build.

In reality, their objective interests are aligned – what we call in France the “convergence of struggles” – despite different political identities, tactics, and practices of power. This alignment is without doubt partially momentary, but as Machiavelli said, politics is the art of seizing the right moment to act.



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# QUALITY OF LIFE BEFORE SUSTAINABILITY

## QUESTIONING CONTEMPORARY GREEN DISCOURSE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**SHERILYN MACGREGOR**  
BY **TINE HENS**

A Green New Deal is good, but an ecofeminist one is even better. University of Manchester environmental politics expert Sherilyn MacGregor has explored the writings, theories, and critiques of ecofeminism to develop the concept of ecological citizenship on how citizens are key to social and ecological transformation. She spoke to Tine Hens about what we can learn from justice-centred ecofeminist theories and why climate action must look beyond technological innovation to embrace quality of life for all.

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**TINE HENS:** So tell me, what is ecofeminism?

**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** Ecofeminism is often deliberately misinterpreted as concern for the planet that almost essentially belongs to women, as if they were pre-programmed simply because they have children and can be mothers. These are precooked, unscientific assumptions. In the course of its own history, ecofeminism has evolved into a critical, political movement that not only focuses on women's rights, but also connects different forms of oppression.

Ecofeminism was born in the 1970s out of a feminist critique of the environmental movement and an ecological critique of the feminist movement. The analysis is fundamentally simple: the oppression of people and the subjugation of nature start from the same logic that we find in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal thinking. In this sense, you cannot tackle one injustice if you are silent about the others. As a feminist, you can't simply argue for higher wages for women

if you remain blind to planetary boundaries and the fable of eternal growth. In the same way, it's pretty perverse for an ecologist to work towards alternative ways of living and consuming without pointing out gender role patterns or the over-representation of male standard-bearers.

In this sense, ecofeminism is essentially intersectional in that it links different forms of exclusion and injustice – from racism to environmental pollution – and challenges privilege and the existing order. It is therefore not surprising that the existing order reacts to it in a poisonous and dismissive manner. Or that they deride ecofeminism as a product of oversensitive, panicky women. Or that they attack women as such. And yes, they even react by casting suspicion on climate science.

**In the US, a Feminist Green New Deal has been put forward by a coalition of women's rights and climate justice organisations.<sup>1</sup> Is a Green New Deal not transformative enough?**

**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** This Feminist Green New Deal was launched in October 2019 and at first glimpse it makes certain points that aren't put forward enough in mainstream green politics. Reproductive rights, for example, especially in the face of climate change.

The best-known environmentalists like Jane Goodall and David Attenborough are neo-Malthusian: "Stop population growth to stop climate change." That cannot be allowed to carry on without criticism. We have to call it what it is: a form of racism and neocolonialism. Feminists in particular should speak up about this issue, because it will be an attack on women's bodies.

Another principle in the Feminist Green New Deal is a different approach to work and labour. We have to understand work as being much more diverse. It's not just about paid jobs – all caring work has to be seen as an integral part of a green jobs agenda. We can't rebuild or transition to a new kind of economy if people just keep on making things. We need to employ people and pay them well in caring jobs: educators, nurses, community workers, home helpers.

So these are all good and necessary points of this Feminist Green New Deal. At the same time, it's still very human-centred and mentions nothing about moving to ways of respecting and giving agency to the more than human. If it was an ecofeminist Green New Deal, that would be in there – the idea that humankind is just one species among others on this wonderful planet.

<sup>1</sup> See <<http://feministgreennewdeal.com>>.

How can you move these more profound understandings of the climate crisis from the side rooms to the centre stage of the debate? How do you start redefining work when the focus is on the deployment of big, green infrastructure through a “world war-like mobilisation”?

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**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** The dominant perspective within green economics is that of green growth, a kind of ecomodernist idea that is all about investing in the right technology and triggering fantastic innovation. The strategy is not to say that’s wrong, but to show that it’s not going to bring the masses along. We’re all worried about right-wing populism, and how this has an attraction for people who are feeling left out, not listened to, and neglected.

You can’t answer rising populism with more elite solutions. Technofixes are exactly that. They’re not going to create jobs for the masses and put money in everyone’s pockets. So how can you turn your green agenda into a popular agenda? Every Green New Deal must appeal to the working class, the cleaners, the hotel workers, the restaurant cooks. What’s in it for them? Why is it good for them? If we change the economy, it has to change in a way that improves quality of life for all. In terms of money, economic justice, healthier air, cleaner neighbourhoods, better food, and time. It’s about these intersections of low-carbon and high-welfare policies.

Ecofeminism criticises the traditional environmental movement. Is it too privileged, too white, and blind to its own exclusion mechanisms?

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**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** Two examples from the past year. For every Greta there exists a young person of colour. Yet Greta draws all the attention. That’s not her fault, but it’s important for the media to make sure diverse voices can be heard. Second: Extinction Rebellion (XR). Their strategy is civil disobedience and getting arrested. However legitimate that may be, it ignores the simple reality that someone with a dark complexion would rather not end up in a cell. There are plenty of reports about police violence and racism. You can’t sweep that under the carpet because the end would justify the means.

Right now, like the rest of the environmental movement, XR is pretty white. The debate about the importance of representation, diversity, and inherent justice is starting to unfold. Inequality and climate policy are two sides of the same coin. Not everyone likes it, but it is a necessary debate. You cannot talk about climate policy and remain silent about structural injustice or other forms of exclusion. And it is not only about injustice at a global level, but also in our own backyards. In my research, I have experienced how and why green themes are regarded as elitist when they do not have to be. But this is the result if you talk more about electric cars than about the importance of public transport.

THE OPPRESSION OF  
PEOPLE AND THE  
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CAPITALISM, AND  
PATRIARCHAL THINKING

You did research in different neighbourhoods in the UK city of Manchester where you found out that people weren't interested in the green agenda. How do you make this agenda popular?

**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** Stop talking about sustainability and start talking about and investing in quality of life. Under the conditions of austerity in the UK, this is crucial. Working-class people are harmed by all the cuts in social welfare and are concerned about their daily comfort. You can't go to them and speak about buying less or changing behaviour. Some people simply need to consume more because their basic needs aren't fulfilled. That's why justice is the right word, rather than equality. The minute you start to talk about justice, about a fair distribution of means, it resonates with people.

The most recent research I did in Manchester was in a community called Moss Side, which is well known as a very deprived and diverse area. We reached out to the inhabitants on subjects like quality of environment and quality of everyday life, and one of their biggest concerns was rubbish on the streets. We also worked with migrant residents from Somalia, who are treated by policymakers as hard to reach – a community they don't understand.

We discovered that there's a great need for the non-Western engagement of immigrants with nature and the environment to be acknowledged. They see the world through Islamic

principles about not wasting and caring for the natural world. Being open to that brings hope for a more inclusive understanding of sustainability. We have to stop making it seem like environmentalism is a white, middle-class concern. It's time to start decolonising environmentalism and climate change policies. The more we question the narrow frame of Western environmentalism, the more will change.

**It doesn't help that a lot of the communication about climate change is quite abstract about "reducing emissions", "parts per million", or "going climate neutral". As if this existential crisis is the excel sheet of the accountant of the planet.**

**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** The science is clear. There is no longer any discussion about that. So what do we do? That question turns it into more interesting discussions in which more people can participate. What does a post-carbon, fair and just society look like? We need to translate the knowledge and the science into a palpable imaginary. How do we employ people? What kind of society do we want to live in? What are its basic principles? That's

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ENVIRONMENT

where caring for people and the planet becomes a more accessible vision than solar panels, energy-efficient housing, and precision agriculture. In Moss Side, people live in houses so outworn you cannot even begin to make them carbon neutral. So where do you start? By leaping over the scientific jargon and putting quality of life at the centre.

**Elections prove over and over again that people are willing to vote against their own interests. Some voices in the environmental community even hint at the straightforward choices a non-democratic government can make. It seems like we're not only living a climate crisis, but also a democratic crisis.**

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**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** I would rather have democracy in a poor environment than repression in a perfect environment. We don't need less democracy, we need much, much more. All over the world, and certainly in the UK, party politics is becoming extremely polarised and toxic. There's a loss of vision, and hatred is being nurtured by strategy and negative campaigning. It's a sad and troubling evolution. But maybe it is also a chance for alternatives to blossom.

There have been some interesting and successful experiments with citizens' assemblies in Ireland and in British Columbia over a carbon tax. In the UK, smaller and more specific citizens' juries led to the banning of GMOs.

Finding common ground, speaking, and listening are so desperately needed. I can imagine citizens' assemblies starting to take shape in cities, or even on a community level. Cities are way ahead of national governments on climate – they're the right size for doing this. But they also struggle to reach out to the non-converted. The mayor of Manchester tries every year to organise a green summit. It's really nice to go there, but you look around and only see white faces. "We don't know how to reach out," is an often-heard complaint – to which I say, "Get out there and instigate kitchen table discussions around

a few common questions. Record people's ideas. Decentralise and remove thresholds." Decentralising is a very ecofeminist point of view. Not just the process of decision-making, but also the dominant knowledge.

**Some would argue we don't have time for the slow process of citizens' assemblies. They argue we need big solutions that we can upscale at an unprecedented tempo.**

**SHERILYN MACGREGOR:** I don't deny that climate is an emergency but sometimes this has been used to force a certain direction, which is why this "climate emergency" language worries me. It may be rhetorically useful, but there's a negative side. What happens in emergencies? You're allowed to take exceptional measures. This could mean taking people's rights away, which is something we can never allow to happen.

In response to the "we need to upscale" argument, I like to point out that we have to value every kind of meaningful action. It's a very masculine thing to focus on big solutions, on a politics of resisting and fighting. This must be called out because it's a way to plant doubts in the minds of those who are willing to act. It's saying that caring for your community garden has no value.

Let me give you an example from my neighbourhood, where there is a lot of poverty,

alienation, and social isolation. People have decided to come together and start cleaning up forgotten green spaces and alleys, to plant flowers and to create nice places for children to play and elderly people to sit. It's no big deal, you could say, it's just about people coming together, caring together, and keeping those plants alive. But what you really make happen is restored contact and connection. It starts with someone from Malaysia talking to an elderly Jamaican woman and realising they have so much in common. There is such hope in that.



**SHERILYN MACGREGOR**

is a Canadian environmental social scientist based at the Sustainable Consumption Institute at the University of Manchester, UK. Her most recent book project is the *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment* (2017, Routledge).



**TINE HENS**

is a journalist on climate change for *MO\** and author of *Het kleine verzet* (2015, Epo).







# HOOKED ON GROWTH

## REWIRING INSTITUTIONS FOR WELLBEING

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**ÉLOI LAURENT**  
 BY **LAURENT**  
**STANDAERT**

Is the European Green Deal a sign that the structures of power have woken up to the climate emergency? Not quite yet, argues Éloi Laurent. Institutions suffer from inertia, ideas become articles of faith, and interests are stubborn. Reform at the European and national level is essential. From a narrow focus on GDP growth, a new policy paradigm needs to emerge that is capable of thinking broadly and ecologically about wellbeing, sustainability, and justice.

**LAURENT STANDAERT :** Why do you say that GDP growth is no longer a useful public policy indicator?

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** Growth needs to be abandoned because it doesn't help us understand the world in which we live. Nor does it help resolve the crises currently in motion and that will shape the 2020s, for which we should take full responsibility.



This interview is available in its  
 original language (French)  
 on the *Green European*  
*Journal* website

**HALTE À LA  
 CROISSANCE,  
 VIVE LE BIEN-ÊTRE**

Face à l'addiction  
 à la croissance il  
 faut recâbler les  
 institutions pour la  
 construction d'un État  
 social écologique.

The first crisis is inequality within countries. Inequality is increasingly unsustainable and doesn't just concern income and wealth but also health and education. This crisis doesn't just affect economic dynamism but also social cooperation. Second is the environmental crisis: you only have to look at the fires in Australia and the Amazon, repeated natural disasters, and the sweeping consequences of global warming. The third crisis is that of liberal democracy. Data from Freedom House shows that many countries which opted for democratic regimes in recent times are now turning away from it. In the 1990s, Central and Eastern Europe was the new frontier for democracy. Now it's the frontier for authoritarian regimes. Elsewhere, harsh neoliberals are being elected. Democracy is under attack not just in countries

that used to dream of it, but in countries once thought to be at democracy's very heart: Greece, France, the UK, the US, and India.

GDP growth tells us nothing about these crises in terms of comprehension, analysis, or policy solutions. You can look at the GDP growth per capita of any country in the world and not even notice these major crises.

**Since the 2008 financial crisis, and even before then, proposals for alternatives to GDP growth were popular in Europe and elsewhere, as well as in the United Nations. Why does moving away from GDP seem such a remote prospect?**

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** Transitions happen – or do not happen – due to three main factors: ideas, interests, and institutions.

When it comes to ideas, there is a colossal amount of intellectual training to be done. Since 1934, the idea of GDP and its growth as a kind of compass has been deeply rooted in our imaginations through schools, universities, and other institutions. This doctrine is endorsed by the vast majority of economists and has percolated into society at large. In reality, GDP is poorly understood and seldom questioned. It has acquired an almost mystic dimension. Take President Macron, educated in the best schools in France. For him, the economy is start-ups, finance, and the GDP growth rate.

Gross domestic product (GDP) refers to the total amount of goods and services made in an economy during a given period. It is measured by tracking the flows of income, expenditure, and value added. Efforts to make sure GDP captures the "real" size of the economy have led to strange accounting practices to bolster figures such as "imputed rent", which is the rent that people living in their own home would pay if they were in fact renters, or the inclusion of black market activities such as drug dealing. Despite these sleights of hand, many activities vital to society such as unpaid childcare are not included. Growth refers to a real-term increase in GDP. As currently defined, GDP growth only reflects a small part of what determines human wellbeing and says nothing about resilience, sustainability, or distribution.

The blindness around GDP speaks to a total absence of consideration for the surrounding reality, an absence of ecology.

Institutions are ideas embodied as places of power and GDP growth is politically powerful because it is embedded in how government budgets are set. Around the world, laws are adopted to encourage GDP growth. Most of the time, the statistics given to members of parliament concern nothing but GDP and its components – not the data on inequality, the natural world, or the ecological footprint of industrial activities.

Interests are undoubtedly the most difficult to overcome. Some people and organisations think in terms of growth because it is to their advantage. They don't want to expose things which aren't measured by this indicator because they are in fact destroying those things.

#### **How can these obstacles to breaking with GDP be overcome?**

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**ÉLOI LAURENT:** The green transition should learn from earlier societal advances. On marriage equality, societies have gone from being broadly homophobic to accepting marriage equality in a decade. It took organising, arguments, and deconstruction to penetrate the heart of the ideas-institutions-interests system. The challenge for the 2020s is changing the economy as both a system of thought and a social system. Today, the main stronghold of resistance to the transition is not civil society or the political world but the economic system. Economic imaginaries, which I call economic mythologies, as well as patterns of consumption and production, make transition very difficult in concrete terms.

Signs of change appeared around 2007 to 2009 with the European conference Beyond GDP and the Stiglitz Commission report. In 2015, the United Nations established 17 Sustainable Development Goals and made

sure that GDP didn't dominate the agenda. In 2019, four countries decided to trade GDP for wellbeing indicators as their societal compass: Finland, New Zealand, Scotland, and Iceland. In many institutions – such as the OECD or the French statistics agency INSEE – there are signs that the belief in GDP is waning. What best explains the sometimes irrational centrality reserved for GDP and growth is the imagination: belief is more powerful than thought or reflection among humans. The belief in growth is truly irrational, on the order of mythology. But change is underway, even if it's not moving fast enough.

#### **Does moving beyond growth necessarily entail moving beyond capitalism?**

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**ÉLOI LAURENT:** I don't know what capital-C capitalism is or what leaving it behind would mean. I know what growth is. Capitalism changes its appearance every decade and has existed, almost everywhere in different forms, for five centuries. There are two general definitions of capitalism: the separation of the means of production and labour, and the manipulation of time to create wealth from profits. These two elements are not necessarily incompatible with the preservation of the biosphere. Finland is one of the most advanced countries on the planet when it comes to sustainability, environmental taxation, health, and the fight against social inequality, and it's a capitalist country.

IF GROWTH'S  
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## Are institutions the levers for changing our relationship with growth?

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** The key is how budgets are set. The institutions base their budgetary decisions on indicators, today geared obsessively towards GDP growth. My proposal is simple: base the direction of public policy on different indicators. That requires action at the European and the national levels. The statistics available on the state of each country need to be improved to include indicators on wellbeing and sustainability covering, for example, inequality, infrastructure, health, education, and the environment. The same needs to be done at the level of regions, cities, and communities, as well as in the world of business. Modified accounting rules could make businesses internalise costs and take responsibility for the social and environmental impact of their production processes.

At the EU level, the European Semester that obliges member states to apply budgetary discipline criteria tied to growth must be reformed.<sup>1</sup> The idea promoted by the Stability and Growth Pact, whereby discipline and growth are the two pillars of the European project, is dangerous. If cooperation between states and wellbeing were to be measured rather than discipline and growth, it would be real progress at the European level. For that to happen, there's no need to bury the von der Leyen Commission, just to bring it up to date. This Commission needs to realise that it hasn't come to power in the Europe of 1995 but of 2020.

## The European Commission has announced its European Green Deal. Is this the beginning of the green transition?

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** As it stands, no. President von der Leyen has said repeatedly that the European Green Deal is a new growth strategy. A week before it was presented by the Commission, the European

<sup>1</sup> Each year, the European Commission scrutinises the policies and budgets of national governments to make a series of recommendations. If government borrowing is deemed excessive in relation to GDP then governments face fines and sanctions from the European Commission.

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE  
2020S IS CHANGING THE  
ECONOMY AS BOTH  
A SYSTEM OF THOUGHT  
AND A SOCIAL SYSTEM

Environment Agency published a report confirming

that if the European Union continued to promote economic growth, it would not succeed in aligning human wellbeing with the preservation of the biosphere.<sup>2</sup>

The plan's climate objectives are disappointing but what is most problematic is the idea of decoupling. Decoupling GDP growth from CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and the use of natural resources is an illusion. It's enough to look at the global energy mix, of which fossil fuels make up 80 per cent, or the fact that economies are consuming more natural resources than at any point in the 20th century. GDP growth is synonymous with worsening environmental catastrophe, in Europe as in the regions where Europe obtains its resources. GDP growth masks reality and, by pushing growth to the maximum, there is an impression of an extraordinary relative decoupling. Since 1990, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions at the global level have increased by 60 per cent, while GDP has increased by 380 per cent. GDP has increased 30-fold since 1970, overshadowing the fact that the consumption of natural resources has tripled.

If growth's new clothes in the Green Deal are decoupling and material efficiency, then Europe's climate strategy is doomed to fail.<sup>3</sup>

The numbers and experience prove that this

doesn't work and we continue to rely on irrelevant indicators. Today, the European Union increases its ambitions as it misses its targets and neglects to sharpen its tools. What's more, social justice is missing as an objective of the Green Deal. From the outset, Roosevelt's New Deal used environmental measures as the means to achieve social justice. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal in the US deals with inequality, not growth.

**In Brussels, they would tell you that overly restrictive climate policies will lead the EU to lose its competitiveness and that jobs could be lost.**

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** No study shows that climate policies would lead to Europe losing its competitiveness. Job losses were caused by austerity, macroeconomic policies, and the Stability and Growth Pact. Climate policies have nothing to do with the recession that devastated the euro. This straw man argument has been around for 20 years. China hasn't lost any competitiveness by venturing into the solar panel business. The reality is that renewable energy is excellent for job creation, that environmental taxation is too low, and that the environmental policies are nowhere near where they need to be.

2 European Environment Agency (2019). *The European environment – state and outlook 2020: Knowledge for transition to a sustainable Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

3 For a full analysis, see: Éloi Laurent (2020). "The European Green Deal: Bring back the new". *Policy brief* (63). OFCE, Centre de recherche en économie de Sciences Po. Available at: <[bit.ly/2w6Wldn](https://bit.ly/2w6Wldn)>.

**You would also be told that we'll have to compensate for all the jobs lost due to the transition towards a greener economy.**

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** The notion of a just transition makes very few appearances in the European Commission's Green Deal proposal, and, when it does appear, it's too restrictive. Just transition concerns much more than financial compensation for workers in the fossil fuel sector. 10 years ago, International Labour Organization reports limited the link between the social and the environmental to employment and compared green jobs with already existing jobs. But the link goes beyond employment, particularly employment in the sense of the 20th-century compromise between workers and capital. Today, the link between the social and the environmental concerns health and ecology. Urban pollution in Europe kills 500 000 people a year. Air pollution and its health consequences, access to quality food, and prevention of chronic diseases are subjects that also affect workers insofar as they are citizens.

**You argue that just transition in the 21st century requires a "social-ecological state". How does that differ from the welfare state, albeit much weakened by neoliberalism, as it exists today?**

**ÉLOI LAURENT:** The social-ecological state emerges from the same philosophy as the welfare state. The welfare state aims to

protect individuals from those collective social risks that can devastate their wellbeing. The difference is the nature of the risk: it is no longer just illness, old age, maternity, or poverty, but also droughts, heatwaves, and floods. The social-ecological state represents a public power strong enough to regulate the short-termism of the market, moderate the headlong pace of the financial world, and face up to the challenges of the 21st century.



**ÉLOI LAURENT**

is a senior research fellow and professor at Sciences Po, and a visiting professor at Stanford University. His latest book is *The New Environmental Economics: Sustainability and Justice* (2019, Polity).



**LAURENT STANDAERT**

is editor-in-chief of the *Green European Journal*.



# *A Green Deal for a Geopolitical Age*

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In the 21st century, geopolitics has returned with a vengeance. Ursula von der Leyen's "geopolitical Commission" will have to be prepared to put its money where its mouth is the European Green Deal is to succeed. Roderick Kefferpütz analyses what it will mean to geopoliticise the EU's plans and why Greens must take this task seriously in the years ahead.

Over a decade ago, the world slid into the worst economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression. Governments cobbled together multi-billion dollar economic stimulus packages as a response. This crisis gave birth to the concept of the Green New Deal. The idea of using economic stimulus packages to simultaneously boost the economy and prevent climate change was gaining traction. Unfortunately, few national governments pursued it.

A decade later, the opportunity has re-emerged. The world economy is again standing on the brink of an economic downturn amid climate catastrophe. In this situation, a Green New Deal would be a win-win.

The new European Commission led by President Ursula von der Leyen has come to accept these realities and has

unveiled its "European Green Deal". This European flagship policy is a new economic growth strategy that aims to turn the EU into the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050. It is about time the Commission advanced such an agenda, something similar to what Greens across Europe have been backing for years.

The Green New Deal was always about connecting economic and climate issues and addressing them simultaneously. It allowed the Greens to formulate a coherent economic and financial policy and break out of their eco-niche as they grew up politically. Following the Great Recession, the Green New Deal made headlines and was in line with the political zeitgeist as the Greens became increasingly recognised for their political programme.

## **GEOPOLITICS IS BACK**

It would be foolish to believe that a concept developed in the first decade of the 21st century could be transposed into the 2020s without an update. The world has changed. The issues of the day are no longer just economic, social, and environmental. Geopolitics has returned with a vengeance. In the words of the historian Robert Kagan: "The jungle grows back." Amid a fundamental geopolitical realignment, the international order is breaking down. The United States and China are locked in a hegemonic conflict. The Middle East is a powder keg. Liberal democracy is on the retreat. The World Trade Organization is facing an existential crisis. Protectionism is on the rise. NATO and the transatlantic relationship are under strain. World orders do not last forever.

Under those circumstances, geopolitics comes front and centre. It needs to be considered transversally, integrated into every policy and political issue. The new EU Commission appears to have understood this Ursula von der Leyen has vowed that this will be a "geopolitical" Commission. Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief, has stated soberingly that



## RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ

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the EU must "learn to use the language of power." So far, however, this is not happening. A silo mentality appears omnipresent – geopolitics and the European Green Deal are pursued in isolation. In a geopolitical world, the European Green Deal needs to be geopoliticised.

The spheres of security and economy are increasingly linked. It is no longer about economics but geoeconomics. The neoliberal credo of open markets, unfettered free trade, and laissez-faire is over. The state has returned, mixing politics, security interests, and economics. Huawei's role in 5G, China's One Belt One Road Initiative, US extra-territorial sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and US export controls against high-tech goods to China are economic issues that all pursue clearly geostrategic interests.

## A DEAL THAT THINKS STRATEGICALLY

Geopoliticising the European Green Deal is a task that Greens must come to grips with. Green parties that have strengthened their economic profile over the years must now work on their geopolitical profile. That includes developing a broader

conceptual framework and strategy – not an easy task given the Greens' traditional pacifist roots and scepticism towards power politics. *The Economist* recently noted that, while "most Greens shed their instinctive pacifism long ago", their foreign policy impulses, be it on China or Russia, "do not make up a broader strategy."<sup>1</sup>

Geopolitical considerations must take three diverging perspectives into account. First, the European Green Deal should consider its contribution to Europe's existing geopolitical challenges. Second, it should reflect upon the impacts that the European energy transition might have on the rest of the world. Third, it must factor in potential impacts within the EU and their potential spill-over effects.

On the first, Europe is in an increasingly difficult position. The United States and China are undermining the multilateral order, fighting over spheres of influence. Europe is to some extent caught in the middle with both parties pressuring the EU and its member states to choose a side. Europe's vast exports, while economically beneficial, make it politically vulnerable. The export dependency both actors and urge for

foreign direct investment into Europe is becoming something of an Achilles heel.

The US and China have effectively extorted Germany with regards to its automotive sector. While Beijing warned Germany that it might import fewer cars should Germany block Huawei from its 5G network, Washington threatened to put tariffs on European cars should Germany not activate the arbitration mechanism of the Iran nuclear deal (which it then did). Writing in the *Financial Times*, Wolfgang Münchau hit the nail on the head: "If Europe had its modern-day Metternichs or Talleyrands, they would start by addressing that specific vulnerability first: stop the dependence on export surpluses to end the blackmail."<sup>2</sup>

The European Green Deal could address that vulnerability. Diversifying the economy and boosting domestic-led consumption would decrease foreign economic dependencies. It would also put the EU in a good position to benefit from the global trend towards decarbonisation. The race for clean tech is on. Europe is in pole position to set the standards, financing, and regulatory regime in this

1 "From Protest to Power – The stars have aligned for Germany's Greens". *The Economist*. 2 January 2020.

See: <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/01/02/the-stars-have-aligned-for-germanys-greens>>.

2 Wolfgang Münchau. "There is a void where European foreign policy should be". *Financial Times*. 19 January 2020. See: <[on.ft.com/2SaZfql](https://on.ft.com/2SaZfql)>.

A COMPLETELY  
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new strategic industry. In this context, the European Green Deal could be a pillar of Europe's connectivity strategy, promoting sustainable infrastructure in the countries on Europe's borders and beyond. Integrating neighbouring countries in the EU's energy network would deepen economic ties and ward off China's push to set industrial standards and build economic dominance, seen in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Energy is a key geopolitical feature of the European Green Deal. Energy security is the only geopolitical aspect to Green New Deal thinking that has received adequate attention in the past. A move to a completely renewable and efficient energy system would wean Europe's economy off oil and natural gas from autocratic states, reducing the influence of gas-exporting Russia. In answering the Paris climate goals, the European Green Deal would strengthen multilateralism. As a climate policy, it will also reduce the likelihood of droughts, floods, and water scarcity – all of which have the potential to trigger future geopolitical events, from conflict to refugee movements.

One could even imagine the European Green Deal as a policy that could strengthen the euro internationally. Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, has argued that by promoting green financial markets and issuing green bonds, "Europe can secure greater economic independence from other powers and start to establish the euro as a global currency."<sup>3</sup>

### CALCULATING CONSEQUENCES

However, the geopolitical implications of the European Green Deal policies cannot be overlooked. What will happen to the Middle East and North Africa region when its petrostates can no longer rely on Europe to buy their oil? What future do they have in a post-fossil world order? The political-economic shift may well prove a source of regional instability, conflicts,

and proxy wars in Europe's immediate neighbourhood. The region's national oil and gas corporations, responsible for over half of global oil production, will have severe problems when their assets become stranded. The International Energy Agency found that state energy groups are not ready for a move to clean fuels: "none of the large national oil companies have been charged by their host governments with leadership roles in renewables."<sup>4</sup> Yet oil and gas sales comprise more than 60 per cent of fiscal revenues in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar. The new world energy regime will create winners and losers. The European Green Deal should ensure a role to play for the losers of the new climate order.

One way to achieve this would be to help these states establish ambitious renewable energy infrastructure connected to Europe (such as the DESERTEC project<sup>5</sup>), allowing the EU to import renewable electricity or ensure, for example, that solar energy in the region can be used to produce hydrogen that could be exported for air travel or long-haul freight. The old world

3 Mark Leonard. "The Green Deal will make or break Europe". *Project Syndicate*. 13 December 2019. See: <[bit.ly/2v798My](https://bit.ly/2v798My)>.

4 "State oil companies underprepared for transition to cleaner fuels". *Financial Times*, 20 January 2020. See: <<https://on.ft.com/2OxGT0d>>.

5 The DESERTEC project was a German-led private sector initiative established in 2009 with the aim of providing around 20 per cent of Europe's electricity by 2050 through a network of solar and wind farms across the Middle East and North Africa region.

of energy must be left behind but Europe's neighbours have to be able to find their place in the new world. Ideally, support for the region would be tied to reforms in the areas of corruption, transparency, democracy, and human rights.

The European Union needs to be aware of divergent interests around European Green Deal policies. The proposal for carbon-border adjustment taxes is designed to create an environmental "level playing field". On the one hand, climate tariffs will make sure that European companies do not compete at a disadvantage. On the other, they could invite counter-tariffs and lead to broader trade wars that undermine the international trading order.

The EU will have to tread carefully between conflicting objectives. The Greens have often been vocal in their opposition to free trade agreements. In a world where multilateralism and international trade are under attack, they must consider whether some trade agreements, albeit imperfect, might be necessary as tools to re-affirm the wider order.

Last but not least, the European Green Deal should not become a transition policy that creates winners and losers within the EU. Mark Leonard has warned that it could "make or

break" Europe. It could become a platform that unites Europe and strengthens it vis-à-vis China and the US, or it could divide Europe between East and West. If that happens, third parties such as China will make easy work of dividing Europe even further.

China has already gained a foothold in Central and Eastern Europe with investment promises. This region needs adequate financial backing in its transition to a sustainable economy. This could potentially take on a Marshall Plan character to help the economies of Central and Eastern Europe become fit for the 21st century. Giving the EU member states a direct interest in the European Green Deal makes foreign investment offers with anti-EU strings attached less persua-

The European Green Deal must accept the reality of our geopolitical age – an ambitious task for the new Commission. All the different services and EU departments will have to talk to one another, and EU embassies and representations abroad will have to take on appropriately trained staff to streamline geopolitics and the energy transition. As Green parties grow in power, they too must start to think about geostrategy. In the next few years, the Greens should hold the EU institutions' feet to the fire to make sure a geopolitical strategy for the European Green Deal is developed. It is better to prepare to govern geopolitically sooner rather than later. ■

### *A SILO MENTALITY APPEARS OMNIPRESENT – GEOPOLITICS AND THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL ARE PURSUED IN ISOLATION*

sive. Germany's austerity drive in Europe has already shown what happens when the economy tanks and the EU does not support those members in economic difficulty. Thanks to the lack of investment from the EU, China has bought influence in Greece by buying up strategic assets.

# THE RETURN OF THE GREEN NEW DEAL

## ECOSOCIALISM IN THE USA

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**ALYSSA BATTISTONI**  
& **DANIEL ALDANA**  
**COHEN**

As it stands, the United States will effectively withdraw from the Paris Agreement on November 4th 2020, one day after the upcoming presidential election. Thankfully, in the US as around the world, resistance to fossil capitalism is growing. In a country where three billionaires – Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett – own more wealth than half the population, the inequality and climate crises are increasingly seen as one and the same and the Left has seized on the Green New Deal as the answer. We spoke to Alyssa Battistoni and Daniel Aldana Cohen, two of the authors of *A Planet to Win*, about their vision for a better, healthier, more equal way of life in a post-carbon society.

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**GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:** How did the Green New Deal (GND) get back on the agenda in the US? How have different social movements come together around this vision?

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**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** A resurgent left-wing politics and an increasingly militant climate movement had been operating on parallel tracks for a few years in the US. The climate movement was focused on “keeping it in the ground” and stopping new fossil fuel extraction projects in places like Standing Rock or along the Keystone XL pipeline, while the Democratic Socialists of America [a socialist organisation active inside and outside of the Democratic Party] and the trade unions concentrated on political projects away from the climate. But over the past year, these forces have come together in quite an organic way. Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), probably the politician most associated with the GND, ran for office because she went to Standing Rock and was inspired by the Sunrise Movement. Immediately after she was elected in November 2018, she joined Sunrise Movement protests and opened up a new discourse around the GND. Its revival allows the growing Left to flesh out a broader programme that's not just about stopping carbon-intensive infrastructure but thinking about what to build in its place.

**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** The Sunrise Movement consciously fuses two strands of American social movements: structured movements like labour unions and community groups, and explosive street protests such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Sunrise's effort to combine the strengths of each tendency has paid off. In two or three years, they've come out of nowhere to become one of the most important movements in the country.

Environmental movements in the US have not always done a great job of working with other social movements. Sunrise, in comparison, has taken it upon itself to be an ally to labour and racial and community justice groups. When Sunrise occupied Nancy Pelosi's office in November 2018 and AOC gave the GND worldwide publicity, Sunrise was there with green jobs signs, not pictures of wind turbines or solar panels. It shows an increasing sophistication of political alliance-building.

**How does this revived GND differ from the left-of-centre promise of green jobs that has been around for years?**

**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** The core idea is the same, but the differences are scope and commitment. The GND would see the federal government guarantee a green job to anyone that wants one. Renewing the Civilian Conservation Corps from the original New Deal programme, a job guarantee would give people the opportunity to work in nature, on soil conservation or building hiking trails, to become a care worker, expanding the idea of a green job, or to work traditional green jobs in the energy sector. A large-scale commitment to jobs combats labour's justified suspicion that green jobs will never materialise. Employment in green energy has been rising in the United States but the government has never been prepared to commit to more than the retraining offered under Obama. Fossil fuel workers that lose their jobs need retraining, but most importantly they need jobs. A federal commitment to major infrastructural spending and public works will generate those jobs at scale.

**What role does housing play in the GND?**

**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** Eviction from your home and climate breakdown are the two existential threats of our times for many people. Housing is the most expensive line item in most people's budgets. Housing is responsible for a sixth of the emissions in the US

and transportation by car, mostly to and from homes, is another sixth. Our overall vision is to reduce the use of energy and other resources while improving the quality of people's lives. The idea is of housing as temples of public luxury: rebuilt infrastructure that will physically and concretely improve and decarbonise lives in the same places and at the same time.

Housing is not usually considered as a key piece of climate policy in the US but, once explained, it is an intuitive story that people can connect to. Concrete is responsible for 8 per cent of global emissions, but describing the most egalitarian way to decarbonise cement production will not strike an emotional chord. A story about an affordable, comfortable, more modern, and better located home is inspiring. For the third of Americans or the almost half of black Americans who cannot afford their energy bills, the GND for housing would make an immediate improvement to everyday life. To avoid future dependence on mining and extraction, the house, the home and where homes are located are central to a less resource-intensive version of prosperity.

**The Republicans in the US and the Tories in the UK have built winning coalitions based outside of big cities. Can the GND appeal across the country and in rural areas?**

**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** Quantitatively the Left has already won, as with the popular vote

in the US, so geography is now the key: we have to win outside our urban strongholds. The result of the last UK election wasn't so good, but the Left has the same basic problem of needing to do better with working-class people in disinvested regions outside cities. Building a more geographically extensive coalition will require concrete proposals and negotiations with the people who live in these places. The benefits of GND policies will extend beyond cities. Care work is a placeless concern. Housing matters in towns, suburbs, and rural areas as well as in cities. Flexible public transport that works outside of cities could overcome the fetish for denser modes of living and help people in rural areas move around in a far less expensive way, freeing up their mobility. And moving beyond a top-down model could help to overcome the resistance of rural communities to clean energy developments, which is a pressing political issue in the US.

**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** The GND plan for infrastructure spending will hit the ground across the country and the effects will be felt everywhere. The GND can also be used to imagine green sustainable agriculture and how federal funds can support that vision rather than subsidising environmentally destructive practices. Planting prairie grasses, for example, is critical for carbon absorption and the huge potential of the Midwestern states could be a boon for farmers.

A STORY ABOUT AN  
AFFORDABLE,  
COMFORTABLE, MORE  
MODERN, AND BETTER  
LOCATED HOME  
IS INSPIRING

Some have criticised the GND as productivist green capitalism, while others say that degrowth-type perspectives call for mandated eco-austerity. Is your call for “one last stimulus” an attempt to move beyond these positions?

**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** The GND has at times been used to greenwash public policy. 10 or 15 years ago, the phrase “Green New Deal” was used as a way for America to retain its economic dominance by becoming a leader in green tech. But while the more recent February 2019 GND Congress resolution does talk about developing technology, most of it is oriented towards people’s social needs and decarbonisation, not towards dominating a new growth area for capitalism.

Degrowth advocates make a significant critique but it is imperative to avoid the belt-tightening green politics of sacrifice. At a time of extreme inequality, many people have been sacrificing for a long time already, while another small group of people get to live lavish lifestyles. More sacrifice to fix climate change is just not a winning political message, which is why a vision of public luxury and non-austere ways of living is important. We argue for what we call a last stimulus – that the GND will be an all-out push that will cost a lot of money, generate jobs, and stimulate industrial production. However, the

objective is not to restart the post-war growth engine and re-embark on

the 20th-century project. The objective is to build a world that we want to live in and that we can live in for the long term. Then we can transition into a slower groove.

**Isn’t the GND a return to the 20th-century top-down bureaucracies that were often inefficient and unresponsive?**

**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** In certain areas such as the electricity grid, the GND represents a truly national project. The most sophisticated electricity grids in the world are in Brazil and China: for decades, Brazil has been able to move the renewable energy its dams generate between regions. Managing intermittency requires national coordination and control of the electricity grid and the same is true for rail networks. But for the most part, federal investment will be targeted towards communities of colour and working-class communities through providing funds to local organisations. Democratic ownership can take many forms: worker cooperatives getting preferential contracts, local public banks, racial and community justice groups, or municipal government agencies. Fundamentally, the story is about federal financial resources feeding local self-control and autonomy as the most effective way to achieve a large expansion.



**Affordability is often an effective right-wing attack line against progressive proposals. Why do you stress the importance of organising support over the question of financing?**

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**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** “How will you pay for it?” is an effective attack line because a wider narrative around public spending means that there will never be a convincing counter-argument, even if a plan is fully costed. Whether funded through taxes or monetary policy, spending on people’s social needs or environmental protection is always presented as impossible. But half the American federal budget is spent on the military and nobody asks questions. Let’s question that and organise around climate action to invest in communities and build resilience rather than spending billions responding to terrible disasters after they have happened.

**When people think about the GND, steelworkers building windmills come to mind. Why do you emphasise organising workers in the education and healthcare sectors?**

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**ALYSSA BATTISTONI:** We’re trying to reframe green jobs, as well as the whole growth debate, to make clear we can live good lives in ways that are less resource intensive than the status quo. Decarbonising does not have to mean that your life will get worse. Green energy cannot be ignored but, at the same time, the transition cannot only be about coal miners and oil refinery workers installing infinite amounts of

wind turbines. We need to imagine the world that we want to live in once we have enough wind turbines.

Education and healthcare workers in the US have been at the forefront of a revitalised labour movement in recent years. Both sectors are low-carbon and oriented towards improving people’s lives. Teachers’ unions have been organising community support and linking traditional struggles around wages and benefits to improving services and the quality of education. The reason that Medicare for All is so popular is because America is in a crisis of care. Overdose and suicide rates are rising, and older people struggle to get the care they need. America currently has a very resource-intensive way of delivering a remarkably low quality of life to many people, and the GND is a political counter that offers a different direction.

**A *Planet to Win* mentions that Sara Nelson, chair of the flight attendants’ union, is one of the GND’s most prominent supporters. What explains her enthusiasm for a transition that could put airline workers out of a job?**

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**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** Sara Nelson is one of the best things that has happened to the labour movement in the US in a long time. She understands the relationship between her workers, the broader working class, and the global political economy, and her arguments are all the more powerful because she is rooted

in the concrete labour struggle. The next round of global investment is going to be green and she knows that. Instead of getting drawn into the long-term future of flight attendants, her response is to ask whether it will be the bosses or a movement from below that decides what that green transformation looks like.

**The US does have an isolationist streak and, if it wanted to, it could impose the costs of transition onto the rest of the world. What does an internationalist GND look like?**

**DANIEL ALDANA COHEN:** An internationalist GND would see the US slash its consumption of energy, both fossil and renewable, to make room for the rest of the world to enjoy prosperity. The first step is getting the US's own house in order. Climate change is a global problem, but it is too simplistic to say that the solution must be global. Climate treaties, building on the Montreal Protocol, are based on the notion that every country could come to a sensible agreement, tweak the material substructure of energy, and everything will be fine. But the global economy cannot be reconfigured through negotiation in a room.

Organising along the supply chains of the really existing global economy is essential. Groups fighting over local energy utilities in Rhode Island in the north-eastern US need to forge alliances with the communities contesting lithium mining for rechargeable batteries

in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile, for example. Global solidarity campaigns such as the Via Campesina food sovereignty movement are precedents for this kind of action. Our view of internationalism is based on looking at how the economy is physically, economically, and legally organised and making interventions at every one of those points.



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# *Another State is Possible*

## Greening the Levers of Power

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Throughout 2019, Greta Thunberg and a wider climate movement repeatedly demanded a government response to the climate emergency. And repeatedly, the response of those in power was to listen, sometimes applaud, and do nothing. Modern states were not built to protect the environment but today are essential institutions for building a sustainable future. Lucile Schmid tracks the evolution of the French state in relation to the environment, arguing that the task for political ecology is its transformation.

**W**hat kind of state is needed for a successful ecological transition? The signing of the Paris Agreement at COP21 exposed the reality gap that shapes the attitudes of governments towards the environment. Diplomacy is not where domestic economic and social decision-making takes place. Nor is it where political parties do battle in national democratic life. Adopting an ambitious and universal climate agreement does not clear the path to a green state. It's just where the problems begin.

The French example is particularly instructive. The French state is strong but its response to environmental issues at a national level has traditionally been weak. In France, the state

initially concerned itself with matters of sovereign power: defence, security, and the economy through taxation and public investment. Its role gradually expanded to include reducing inequality, redistributing wealth, creating a national education system, and building a welfare state, as well as guiding regional development and cultural policy. The state now did everything, except, of course, when it came to the natural world. France enjoys a long naturalist tradition dating back to the work of Georges-Louis Leclerc in the 18th century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was just as passionate about botany as he was about democracy. But concern for nature developed in relative isolation from the building of the state, through learned societies, research, and

citizens' initiatives outside of the corridors of power. This separation laid the foundations for a real ambivalence between the ethos of technological progress promoted by the prestigious engineering schools from which the governing class was drawn, and a country rich in landscapes and biodiversity, from its inland regions to the mountains and overseas territories.

Yet, in 1971, as part of Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas' "new society" project, France became one of the first countries in Europe to create a ministry of the environment. But, as a ministry without resources, it was all talk and no action. It was at this time that major environmental battles with the state began – most notably anti-nuclear protests and the Fight for the Larzac, a campaign led by farmers against the expansion of a military base in south-west France. René Dumont's presidential bid in 1974, a first for political ecology, illustrated the gulf between the productivist policies of successive governments and environmental concerns. Growing environmental awareness in society manifested itself through local opposition to public policies and sometimes in the form of candidates at local elections, as in Alsace. For the French Greens, national issues were elusive and so they invested minimally in traditional



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## LE NECESSAIRE TOURNANT ÉCOLOGIQUE DE L'ÉTAT

Les États modernes n'ont pas été conçus comme réponse aux défis écologiques actuels mais ils en sont aujourd'hui des acteurs clés.

matters of state. However, at the European level, environmental issues rapidly rose up the agenda under the influence of the United Kingdom, which joined the European Economic Community in 1973, and Germany, where society was quick to embrace environmentalism. The European Union inspired much of French environmental law. Whether it be genetically modified food, air quality, or chemicals regulation, the impetus came from Brussels.

The first incumbent of the Ministry of the Environment, Robert Poujade, baptised it the "Ministry of the Impossible". For its lack of resources, certainly, but above all because the environment was considered a sector-specific portfolio rather than an overarching project. Operational separation makes the environment a persistent thorn in the side of other public policy pillars such as the economy, agriculture, and defence. How do you promote French foreign trade – exports of planes, cars, drugs, and agri-foods – and protect the environment at the same time? Won't greening the French tax system automatically create new forms of inequality and social discontent? Is preserving the natural world compatible with local and regional development *à la française*?

## PERSISTENT DISTANCE

In 2007, the *Grenelle de l'environnement* (Environmental Summit), an unprecedented consultation exercise involving stakeholders from elected officials and businesses to NGOs, workers, and local authorities, resulted in the creation of a weightier Ministry of Ecology. For the first time, environment and infrastructure were brought together to encompass functions such as local and regional development, transport, and energy. This widening of

environmental concerns in society are developing outside of and in parallel to that public policy space.

Because transversal relationships between ministries remain largely an empty promise, the strengthening of the Ministry of Ecology has for the most part been implemented vertically. It has not led to deeper collaboration with the Ministry of the Economy and Finance, or with the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of Ecology is still not seen as having power or

## THE FIRST INCUMBENT OF THE MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT BAPTISED IT THE "MINISTRY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE"

institutional scope, which endures today, presents a real opportunity to link the environment to policies that have traditionally enjoyed strong state support. But this major ministry has not always managed to create a shared culture between its different departments. Environmental policy in France has undoubtedly come a long way since the early 2000s. But its technical nature means that policies are often out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people; environmental policy has a language, time frame, and expertise of its own, while

political clout. When he resigned as the Minister of Ecology live on primetime radio on 30 August 2018, Nicolas Hulot – who to this day remains one of the most popular public figures in France – pointed to the governmental system's failure to listen. He stopped short of blaming the prime minister or president individually.

In the autumn of 2019, the fire at the Lubrizol factory in Rouen – a chemical plant classified as highly hazardous under EU chemical safety regulations – once again exposed this lack of understanding.

On one side were local residents and elected officials worried about the impact of the accident on quality of life, health, and the environment, especially for children and the elderly. On the other side were government and senior civil servants primarily concerned with public order, compensation, jobs, and protecting business interests. As days went by, the public was startled to learn that certain rules for hazardous sites had been quietly relaxed and that the amount of dangerous chemicals stored on the site were much higher than reported. Decades after France's nuclear power stations were built, a culture persists among top civil servants and politicians that deem certain subjects too important to be debated publicly.

## CATCHING UP WITH SOCIETY

Today, as in the 1970s, society is driving environmental action through behavioural change, be it on transport, food, or our relationship with other creatures, from planting trees to rejecting animal cruelty. Green aspirations are strongest locally when problems are visible and call for concrete responses. So when in May 2019 the mayor of Langouët, Daniel Cueff, clearly overstepped his legal authority to pass a bylaw banning pesticides within 150 metres of homes, he enjoyed a wave of support from ordinary citizens and local politicians

all over France. Both the law and national institutions were at a disconnect with a society experiencing the ecological emergency at first hand. The example also shows how local authorities are taking a leading role in environmental matters. Action on green issues is now key for the legitimacy of mayors and municipalities in both rural and urban areas.

The face-off between society and the state on the environment has to end: the moment for action has arrived. Year after year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports tell us that time is running out. Government, particularly in France, is meant to be about shaping and achieving common goals over time, and is armed with many levers to make change happen. How can people believe that the "climate fight" will be won if, at the national level, climate action is only paid lip service? The economic model cannot be changed through individual efforts alone. Incentives to buy greener cars or insulate homes will only work if governments implement an environmental vision built upon their power to regulate the economy, enforce the law, and lead by example. Environmental transformation requires more investment and more redistribution between regions and towards the least well off – an overhaul of budget rules and resource allocation.

It calls for a firmer, frankly more interventionist state. That is

the only conclusion to draw from the success of the *Affaire du siècle* (the Case of the Century) petition a few months back.<sup>1</sup>

Another state is possible. What would this green state look like? A state that partners with those working for the environmental good. A state that is uncompromising with those who break environmental laws. A state that is willing to democratically debate issues on which citizens have not had their say. A state that fundamentally changes its economic and financial priorities.

A green state also calls for a new sociology of power. Political ecology in France has always acted as a check on power locally by raising the alarm, asking questions, occupying spaces, and launching initiatives.

Today, it must work on the national level to deconstruct the arguments that underpin how the state thinks and acts. This requires those championing the environment to change their perspective. From only opposing or existing alongside power, they need to recognise themselves as being in a position to transform it. It also requires that environmental awareness spreads beyond the world of green activism. This is already a growing trend in society, if opinion polls are to be believed. Eventually, the process will involve a fundamental transformation of the state's powers, decision-making systems, and priorities, a transformation that is still in its infancy. ■

<sup>1</sup> Between late 2018 and early 2019, over two million people signed the historic petition that launched legal proceedings against the French state for its failure to act against global warming. Launched by the NGO Notre Affaire à Tous (It's Everybody's Business), the petition is part of a wider campaign of climate litigation.



# NOTES FROM A NEW EUROPE

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*Strasbourg*

*Plenary week at the European Parliament*

*November 25th 2024*

Phone to his ear, panting slightly, Emile pushes his way through the crowd streaming out of the Hemicycle and already packing the Flower Bar. “Yeah, yeah, political but neutral – don’t worry ...”

He stops to catch his breath – there’s fidgeting on the other end of the line.

“Yup, fine ... I understand. I promise I won’t go overboard with my old comrades. ... No. ... Listen, how about I send you a first draft around 7 PM, and you tell me where I’m not being objective? How does that sound, boss?”

He hangs up, a bit irritated by his editor’s paternalistic insistence, yet amused to note his frustration. There is excitement in the air, the kind you sense at historic moments. A European Commission investiture always makes for good material, if a bit slow going. Given the predictability of voting and power dynamics in the Parliament, suspense can be lacking. But since Europe’s political centre collapsed in the 2019 elections, fault lines have shifted significantly. In the crisis years, an all-conquering radical right emerged. Led by a new generation of charismatic leaders, it flourished amidst the ruins of social democracy, upending the old order. With 86 MEPs, they now represent the fourth largest group in the European Parliament, just ahead of the vanquished Social Democrats. As in 2019, July’s election of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the Commission came down to just a handful of votes.

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This contribution is available in  
its original language (French)  
on the *Green European*  
Journal website

## CHRONIQUE FUTURE D'UNE EUROPE VERTE

Et si la vague verte  
de 2019 n’était pas  
retombée ? Et si les  
écologistes étaient  
devenus des forces  
structurantes des  
majorités politiques ?

At the start of this “brown wave”, a Greek friend, an intellectual who teaches at the LSE, predicted their success over a couple of pints in central London. “Seriously, Emile, you need to stop with this old-fashioned Europeanism. These fascists are like you Greens. They’re strong because they offer a bold, coherent, and well-articulated vision of Europe and the world. Granted, theirs is of an ancient, white, Christian civilisation of sovereign nations steeped in history and tradition. They jealously guard their interests but are prepared to cooperate to fight the threat of barbarian invasions and globalist dissolution. Islam and Brussels. But it’s simple and it works. It ticks all the boxes: identity, economics, inequality, and security.”

Indeed. The funniest thing, Emile ponders, noticing the growing number of accredited journalist colleagues, is that these neo-fascist forces have done Europe a favour. By re-politicising Europe, they have mobilised a new generation and made European politics a bit more exciting and unpredictable.

Anyway. Of course, his editor would have preferred to cover this important session himself. Unfortunately, kept in Brussels for the imminent birth of his second child, he had to send the newbie. Who’s running bloody late, for that matter.

Yet, after two years writing for *Contexte* in Brussels, this newbie is no longer new. Thanks to a frenetic news cycle and a lack of staff, journalists in the Brussels bubble mature fast. But, in a tired running gag, his boss continues to joke that he found Emile “a bit green”. The implication being that his 10 years as assistant to a French Green MEP, then as advisor to the Green Group in the European Parliament, influences the way he sees things.

Clearly, it does – but that’s also why he was hired. Media, lobbyists, embassies: all players on the Brussels stage have had to gradually green their staff. Because over the past five years, Ursula von der Leyen’s Green Deal has placed environmental issues front and centre, resulting in growing clout for Greens in European politics.

“Coffee please.” Of course, the organic blend is twice the price... We’re not there yet, he complains to himself. With his legal poison burning his hands, Emile looks for a free table somewhere out of the way. He mentally runs through the key ground for his series on the new Commission. Not easy. Especially with short deadlines and an uptight boss.



He'll have to condense things. Green tides versus brown waves. Explain how, bit by bit, the Council got a fresh makeover. How the Greens were better able to counter the far-right threat than traditional forces by embodying a different form of radical protest against the way the world is heading. How Austria's Conservative-Green coalition, which tested the country's Green party's limits, got 2020 underway and set the tone for the years to come. The successes, from Benelux right up to the latest election in 2023, when Denmark and Finland continued the trend begun in 2019 by installing governments led by female Green 30-somethings.

Fortunately, what happened in 2021 is more famous – the autumn when another wall came down in Germany. With 25.7 per cent of the vote, the Grünen pipped the Christian Democrats to the finish line. A Green chancellery to succeed Angela Merkel – the winds of history were blowing strong. The soundtrack to this momentous shift was provided by ecofeminist Grün-Rock bands, just as the Neue Deutsche Welle had done for Berlin's alternative left in the 1980s.

Emile remembers well. A mixture of love and politics saw him leave the Green Group and swap Brussels for Budapest. But travelling often to Berlin or Prague for the Heinrich Böll Foundation, he had followed the election at close quarters. He had watched the small counter-cultural movement born during the protest years in a German society oppressed by its past become the driving force for change. With the worrying rise of the AfD, flitting around 20 per cent of the vote, and the historic collapse of an anaemic SPD, only one coalition was possible. Negotiations were fierce but fast – and Germany's face and attitude changed. To the benefit of Europe at large.

"Emile – hey, mate! Over here!" At a table, gesturing for him to join them, two former colleagues, recently elected MEPs last May, and another he's not seen before. Emile sits down with the three Greens. Céline is from Liège, Kari is German with Estonian roots (she was elected in Tallinn), and he's introduced to Cristina, from Bucharest. She is the campaign director for the new eco-citizen movement that just broke through in Romania's European elections.

He turns towards his friends, "So, ready to govern Europe?" Their winning smiles and steely gazes say it all. "We are Europe now, man!" chides Céline.

"Von der Leyen as Commission President was one of the keys to the deal in 2021," adds Kari. "It sugared the pill for the CDU. And anyway,

we've got the finance ministry in Berlin. I mean, that's basically the ministry of European affairs." She goes on enthusiastically, "In total, we've got seven EU commissioners."

"Plus the Czech commissioner from the Pirates," Céline chimes in. "With some good portfolios. We're gonna change this Europe, damn it. With agriculture, transport, the internal market, digital, and home affairs, we've got some room to manoeuvre. With us, the greenwashing stops."

Emile concurs, "Hmm. Poor Timmermans, he didn't do a bad job. But it's his rival from GroenLinks there now." Before countering, "But VDL's Green Deal, it wasn't all waffle, right? After all, she gave a bit of punch to Europe's climate leadership thing. Isn't that what saved the Paris Agreement?"

"*Mensch!* Business as usual. There was nothing systemic. She backed down on trade deals, the CAP ..." Kari begins her list of indictments of the previous term.

"Transport!" interjects Céline. "She remained very German," she continues with a cautious glance at Kari, "and did everything she could to look after the carmakers, instead of reckoning with an industry in structural crisis. 14 million jobs threatened in Europe and we prop it up and pretend like it can carry on like nothing's changed. It was steel in the '70s all over again. Of course, there were the lorry fanatics in Central Europe, and Romania especially ..." she shoots a furtive glance at Cristina, who immediately corrects her, "And in the West, Céline – above all in France!"

"... She rejected our proposals to switch to rail freight. Seriously, carbon neutrality by 2050 with no help from transport? It's a joke, right?" It's a rhetorical question. In any case, Emile knows very well that behind the outward signs of radical enthusiasm lie sharp political minds with a strong grasp of the issues.

This expertise had long been an institutional strength, allowing the "little" Greens to play with the big boys and girls. But it was also a weakness in polarised politics where recognising complexity can marginalise you. Everywhere, or almost everywhere, the Greens' widely acknowledged competence had been equalled by their lack of charisma and figureheads. Not to mention their repeated difficulties in reconciling radical convictions with political realism.

As it happens, the German experience of transcending the age-old divide between *Fundi* and *Realo* really did change everything. A journalist colleague from the *TAZ* had explained it to him one day,

“You see, Emile, here, unlike in France, generational change has been reflected in the political culture: the Grünen have moved from a compromise of varying degrees of sincerity between two competing wings to a hybrid that keeps the best of both.”

He wasn’t wrong. A pure product of West German post-1945 identity, a mixture of pacifism, feminism, and environmentalism, the Grünen were the only acceptable and tolerated force for social protest. They were able to mature, to move beyond the fiery libertarianism and cultural leftism of its founding generation of *soixante-huitards*. And, thanks to German federalism, they managed to create different shades of green, from the more conservative Baden-Württemberg variety to that of the hipper federal capital.

Emile’s thoughts turn to the French Greens. Torn apart by the Pavlovian reflexes of a political landscape polarised between Right and Left (including among themselves), arguments about ideological purity and the continuous need for a “greening” of French politics and society, “The French Greens are a bit like Sisyphus,” his German colleague had added with his penchant for quoting Camus. Prisoners of an absolutist political system, they were unable to break through in the shouting match between opponents of the Establishment. In any case, Macron’s re-election in 2022, which saw him defeat a candidate from the Left, was confirmation that the culture war was far from won in France.

Emile had covered this traumatic episode as a journalist and activist. By some sort of miracle, most personalities and political parties to the left of Macron had quickly agreed on Christiane Taubira as a joint candidate. The former justice minister just squeezed through to the second round, beating Marine Le Pen by only a few thousand ballots as the radical right-wing vote split between rival candidates.

On the sidelines, the extreme right whipped itself into a frenzy deciding who they hated most: the bankster president or the black poster child for same-sex marriage. The atmosphere between rounds was stifling and, in the end, Macron won by a hundred thousand votes. In this horribly divided country, the French Greens only managed to make an impact in proportional elections, as the 2020 local elections and their historic return of 20 MEPs at the 2024 European elections underlined.

“OK, you’re going to have institutional levers. But will that be enough? In Germany, you still haven’t shut down the coal power stations.

Your Scandinavian partners certainly aren't impressed. And in Austria, migrant NGOs—

Kari interrupts him abruptly. "Hold on, Emile, don't overdo it. First of all, you know that a coalition with the Right isn't a marriage of love. And we're not mining coal anymore, which is a start, right? Then look what made the difference: climate diplomacy. You said it yourself, the first consequence of 2021 was that Ursula and the EU credibly took back control by implementing the Paris Agreement. Have you noticed how Brussels has changed its tone with Beijing and Washington? Our Scandinavian friends play Greta with us, which isn't fair, but what do you expect? At the end of the day, you know what? It helps too. The pressure from our European partners wins us concessions in the coalition."

"Also, this time we're in charge of budgets." Céline lists them. "Luxembourg, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Dublin, Berlin ... We are finally credible on public finances. Like good shopkeepers," she jokes, easing the tension.

"Be that as it may, you're going mainstream. Power means the end of innocence, and—"

Silent until that point, Cristina cuts him off. "Civil society, Emile," she says, in a calm and firm voice, whose accent immediately sends Emile back to his attachment to that part of Europe.

"You see, Emile, Romania is a good example. The institutions there are corrupt. Parties survive thanks to clientelism and, most of all, because the disconnect between the institutional and the citizen side of politics has become structural. That's why the various environmental movements of the past 15 years against shale gas in Punghești or the gold mine in Rosia Montana, not to mention pollution, never became lasting political vehicles. Plus, as you know, Green parties in this region just aren't that representative. They are small, weak, and based on the Germans or the Austrians – or even the slightly conservative agrarian model of the Baltics. But there is the potential to bring together certain progressive urban elites and the more enlightened elements of rural communities – like in Poland, for example."

"What we've seen emerge in Romania is actually quite new. Greta didn't make much of an impact. In any case, those who might've spread her message have left, en masse, for the West. But Australia burning did it. I've seen farmers faced with parched harvests making connections for the

first time. That's how our Movement for the Earth took root in Romania – because in 'earth' farmers saw land and city-dwellers the planet."

"Exactly," agrees Céline, with renewed enthusiasm. "And on this side of Europe, Greta killed it. Especially when she refused to stand for office last year in Sweden, while still calling on people to vote for those 'who take the climate seriously.'"

Emile interrupts, "But she also inspired radical environmentalist movements and parties that competed with the Greens, who were accused of being too centrist, right?"

"That's true," Cristina replies. "But, paradoxically, in politics, the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. It's one of the mysteries of electoral arithmetic. At the outset, it's better to have three movements at 5, 10, and 15 per cent, rather than a single party at 20, especially if you can bring them together later. The competition helped the common cause. By shifting the Overton window – the range of politically acceptable ideas – these extremist environmental movements have moved the political centre towards the Green parties, without having to become less radical."

"I don't completely agree," objects Kari. "Fragmentation can mean weakening. In our proportional systems, it's the ability to sustain radical proposals in a hostile political environment that matters. Just like the Grünen, the Nordic and Benelux Greens stuck to their guns all the way. That's why they're in government now. This window might have been a factor, but much less so than our call for action as the world was confronted with catastrophe."

Emile smiles – these are familiar debates. Debates in which he had often participated. And he must admit that Cristina is right. Something has reconnected the institutional and civic spheres. Hence the increased turnout at the last European elections, exceeding 65 per cent, the high-water mark from 1979, when the then-European Economic Community only had nine members and the Parliament was essentially decorative. The politicisation of European affairs had accelerated and the Europeanisation of domestic politics was gathering pace. Yet Kari is right too. The context favoured those who "take the climate seriously".

In the countries of North-Western Europe, it was, naturally, Green parties, but elsewhere, it was other movements. Pirate parties, not only Czech but French too. There was the Volt movement, with German, Bulgarian, and Belgian MEPs. Then there were MEPs from countries where social struggle remains the dominant political cleavage: in the

convergence of health, work, and wellbeing, environmental concerns finally had found common cause with the Left and gained the support of unions and activists. The result was the election of a handful of parliamentarians from Spain and Greece, as well as a few representatives from a renewed green-left alliance in Croatia, Slovenia, and Poland. It's this relevance and appeal that saw the Greens become the second largest group in the 2024-2029 parliament. A group renamed the "European Ecologists" because, although Greens made up its backbone, they were no longer the only organised members. It was now a truly continental group, which only two large countries, Italy and Poland – and Spain in some way – still partially shunned.

Tomorrow, after Ursula von der Leyen's speech, the group's female Swedish co-president, rather than its male French co-president, will speak on behalf of the group. Now part of the majority that governs the EU, they are there to change the direction and substance of its politics.

Emile has his angle: "radical and responsible". He'll leave it to his editor to find the title.



**EDOUARD GAUDOT**

is a historian and political scientist.

He was a political advisor to the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament for 9 years.

He is the author of three books: *Pour la Planète* (2009, Dalloz), *L'Europe c'est nous* (2014, Les Petits Matins), and *Manifeste des écologistes atterrés* (2015, Temps Présent).

# ALL GROUND IS FERTILE GROUND

## ATTITUDES TO ECOLOGY ACROSS EUROPE

INFOGRAPHICS BY THE  
EUROPEAN DATA  
JOURNALISM  
NETWORK

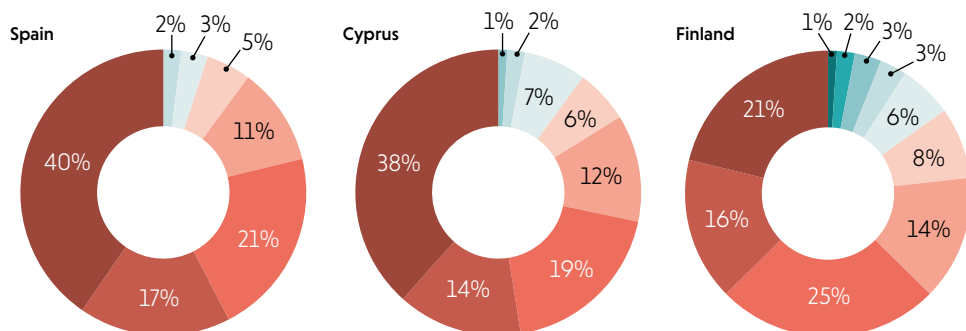
From the changing climate to people's immediate surroundings, ecological issues tangibly shape daily lives everywhere. While perceptions vary from place to place, fundamentally the environment knows no borders. To question conclusions too easily drawn about the link between political trends and geographic differences in economic prosperity, we went back to the numbers to learn more about attitudes around Europe. Looking at surveys on three issues – climate change, organic farming, and biodiversity – as well as figures on real exposure to air pollution, the picture that emerges is complex. If but a snapshot, it challenges common assumptions to deepen our understandings of what ecology means on the ground.

### A Burning Political Issue?

SOURCE: Eurobarometer 490 | 2019

Share of the population that considers climate change more or less important.  
(1 means not very important; 10 means very important)

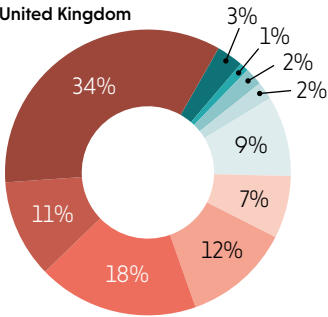
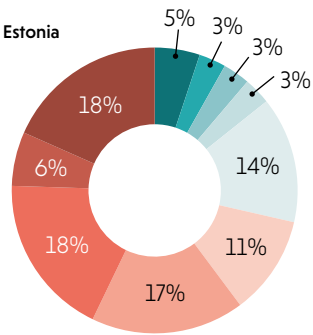
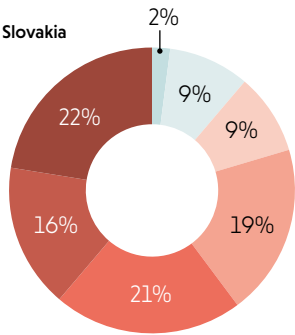
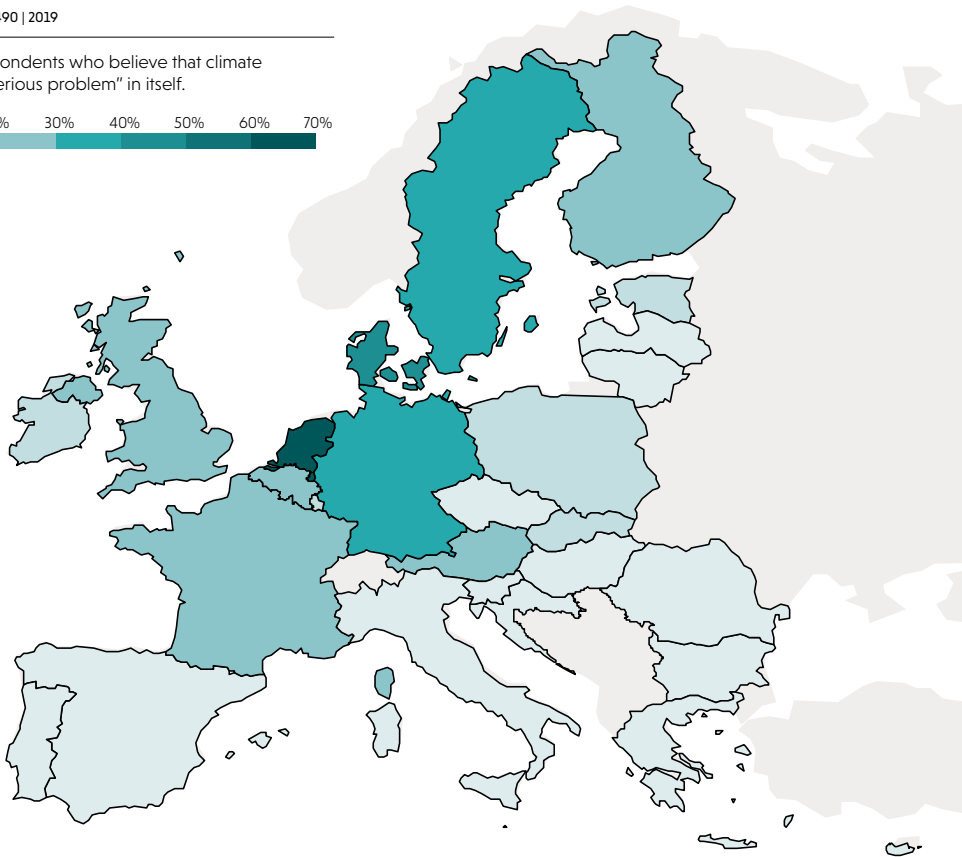
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ("Don't knows" not shown)



Climate Conscious

SOURCE: Eurobarometer 490 | 2019

Percentage of respondents who believe that climate change is “a very serious problem” in itself.

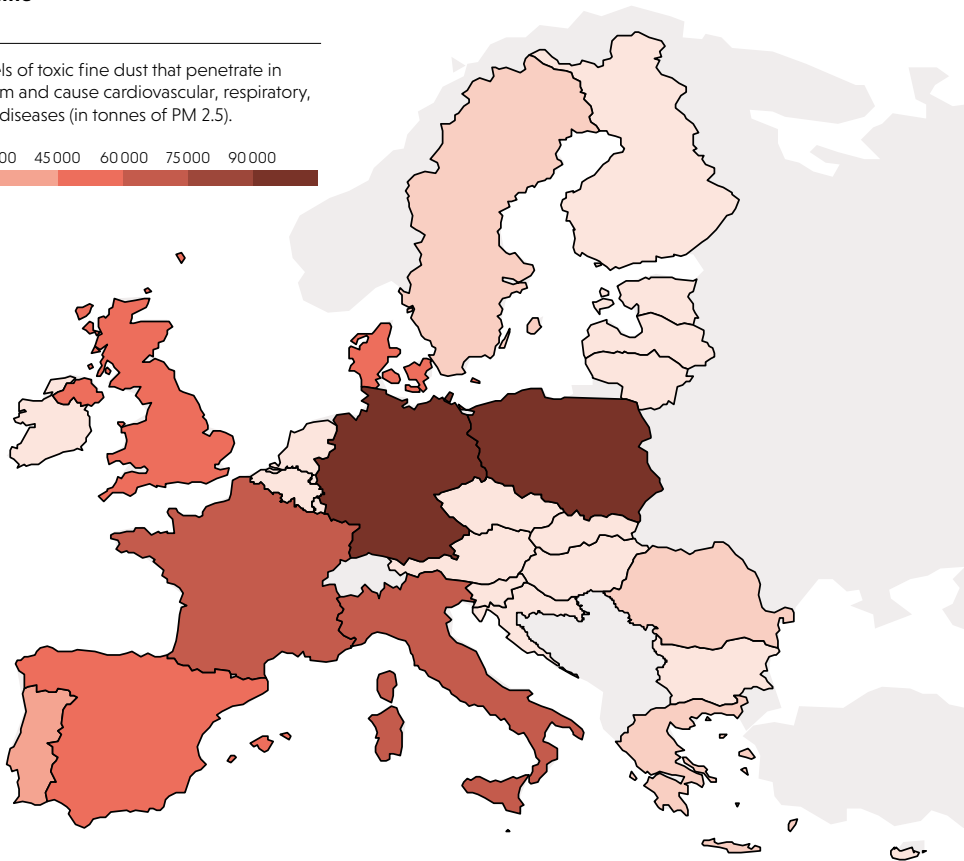




The Air You Breathe

SOURCE: Eurostat 2017

Concentration levels of toxic fine dust that penetrate in the human organism and cause cardiovascular, respiratory, and cancerogenic diseases (in tonnes of PM 2.5).



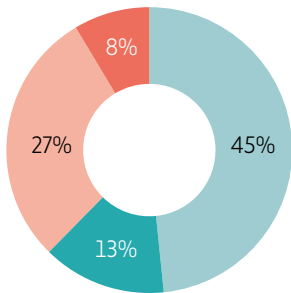
Food for Thought

SOURCE: Eurobarometer 473 | 2018

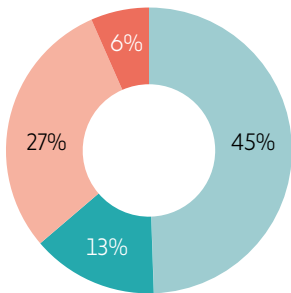
Share of respondents who agree or disagree with the following statement: Food products from organic agriculture are safer than other food products. "Safe" meaning that it ensures a high level of protection of human health and an easy identification of potential feed and food hazards.

Totally agree Tend to agree Tend to disagree Totally disagree ("Don't knows" not shown)

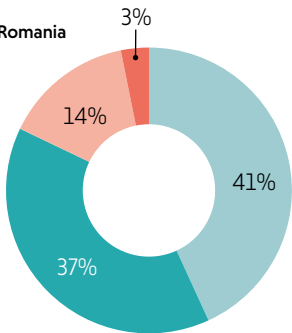
France



The Netherlands



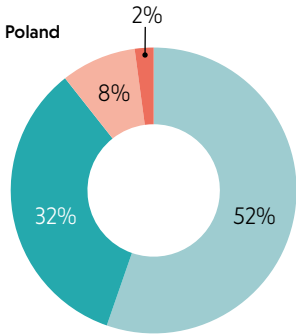
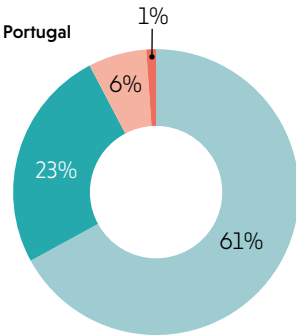
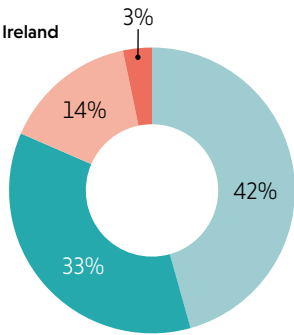
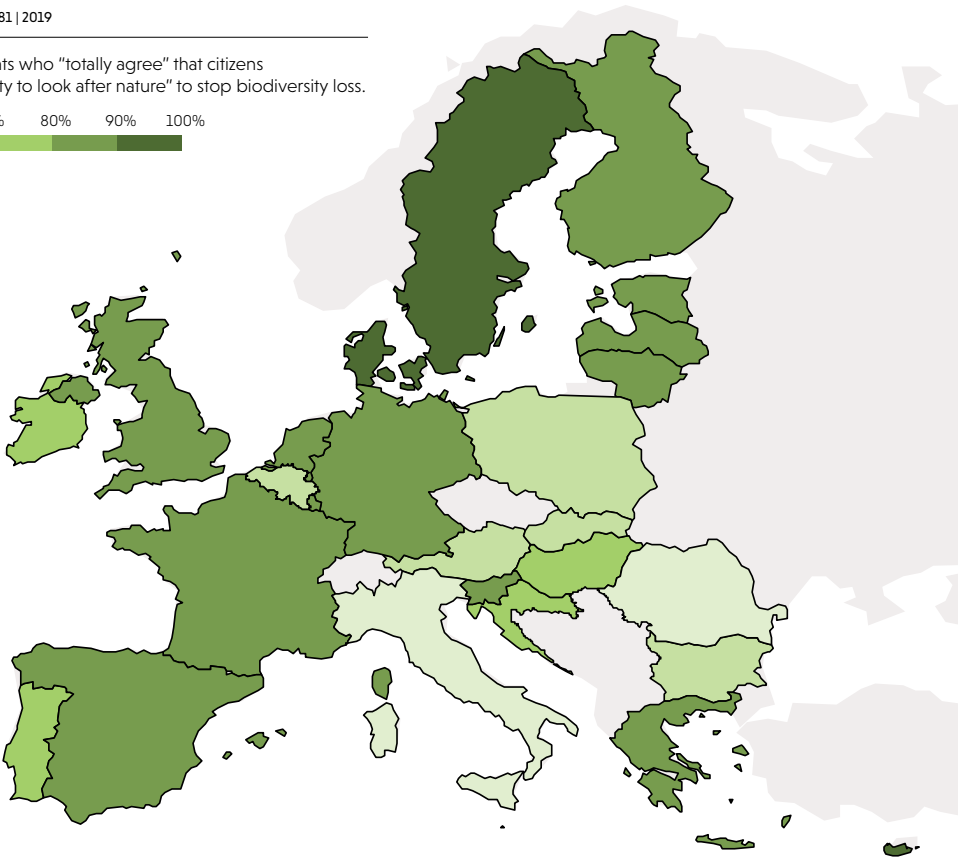
Romania



Responsibility to Protect

SOURCE: Eurobarometer 481 | 2019

Share of respondents who "totally agree" that citizens "have a responsibility to look after nature" to stop biodiversity loss.



# FROM THE STREET UP

## FOUNDING A NEW POLITICS IN SPAIN

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**CRISTINA MONGE &  
 FLORENT MARCELLESI**  
 BY **ESTEBAN  
 HERNÁNDEZ**

Spain is a country with an elevated awareness of environmental issues and its youth has mobilised en masse to save the planet. However, Green political parties enjoy little electoral support. Esteban Hernández discussed the contradictions in Spain with Green politician and activist Florent Marcellesi and University of Zaragoza sociologist Cristina Monge. With a political space for ecology opening up for contestation, whether or not a green hegemony can be built will depend on political ecology's ability to push for real transformation and to offer a convincing narrative that transcends class lines.



This interview is available in its original language (Spanish) on the *Green European Journal* website

**UN PIONERO EN  
 LA MOVILIZACIÓN:  
 LA ECOLOGÍA  
 POLÍTICA EN  
 ESPAÑA**

Una conversación sobre las contradicciones de un país donde la conciencia medioambiental no se ha reflejado en las urnas para los partidos verdes.

**ESTEBAN HERNÁNDEZ:** According to studies by the Centre for Sociological Research of Spanish people's main concerns, the environment is not a chief worry. It has risen up the list, moving from 0.7 to 3.2 per cent in a year,<sup>1</sup> but it's still far from being a real priority. Why is that?

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** We're at the start of a new historical cycle. We mustn't only look at the evolution of survey figures from one month to the next but also the long term, starting with Spain's transition to democracy in the 1970s, which left ecology in a secondary position compared to France or Germany since the dictatorial regime did not permit Green (or any other independent) parties. The difficulties continued with the rise of the anti-austerity 15-M and Indignados street movements in 2011 in the wake of the economic crisis, which also don't see the environment as a priority.

1 The figure of 3.2 per cent dates from December 2019. For the full results, see: <[bit.ly/31ROaNY](https://bit.ly/31ROaNY)>.

But now we are living through a period of profound evolution, the birth of a green hegemony. The 15-M Movement began in 2011 but had been a long time coming, and the same is true of ecology, which, through new movements like Juventud por el clima (Youth for climate), is laying the cultural foundations for a green hegemony. Europe also has great influence and the groundswell taking place in the EU has reached Spain. What is yet to happen is for this cultural hegemony to transform into political hegemony.

**CRISTINA MONGE:** 15-M doesn't influence the "what" so much as the "how". It massively and categorically marks the beginning of a new model of mobilisation that first rejects and then transcends classical forms of organisation such as trade unions or political parties. 15-M goes beyond traditional structures and generates a wave with a discourse that is perhaps disorganised but still very powerful. Youth for climate takes on these characteristics, as do the 8M (International Women's Day) mass mobilisations. It's spontaneous, there's no political positioning, but it is possible for the movement to evolve into a meta-narrative.

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** This is why I say that we are in a moment of hegemonic construction, that there's a groundswell that perhaps doesn't have a clear theoretical corpus, but it will come. This moment, as a real inflection point, is completely unpredictable. Even if

ecology in Spain has been relegated to the macro level, and especially since the Catalan bid for independence since 2012 has taken on so much weight in the Spanish community, it has been very present in recent years in municipalism. Cities like Barcelona or Madrid have been pioneers on ecological issues at the European level. The question with this "climate 15-M" is how to unite the micro and the macro levels. That is the challenge for the coming years.

**The green vote in Spain is split between the centre-left PSOE, left-wing populist Podemos, green-left Más País, and animal rights party PACMA. To what extent do left-wing and centre-left parties complicate the existence of a Green party in Spain?**

**CRISTINA MONGE:** I'm not sure that there will ever be a strong Green party in Spain, similar to the ones in Germany or France, under current conditions, but there is definitely a political space. The problem is already recognised, including amongst conservatives, and the battle is going to be around what to do about it. Everyone knows that there will be a green transition but there are different discourses about how to tackle it, some more neoliberal, others more social democratic or communist. It's here that there will be an ideological fight, and a political space that is distinctly green will be important for pushing the debate in one direction or another.

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** We Greens are an instrument, so the ideological absorption of our ideas by all parties is welcome if that's how we achieve change. But there is still a long way to go – we've seen that in COP25. The problem that we face isn't denialism, but climate hypocrisy – the use of climate change so that nothing changes. We need clear voices that remind us that change must be profound, not cosmetic. Second, we must accept that an economic system based on growth cannot work, and need to think about justice from the perspective of post-growth, beyond the dominant economic models.

In Spain, the government has created a vice presidency of ecological transition, but at the same time it tells us that we should keep on growing. That's why we need a Green party, even if it's not like those in other European countries given the history and situation in Spain. A sufficiently strong Green party would push others to follow through and not fall into climate hypocrisy, as well as raising structural questions that get to the root of the problem.

**The conversation on the green transition always seems to come back to who will foot the bill. In Spain, even solutions like the Green New Deal haven't managed to frame environmentalism as a solution.**

**CRISTINA MONGE:** We're very much in an initial stage. Proposals like the Green New Deal are only really understood by those who

dedicate themselves to this area. To gain wider acceptance, it's important to ground these ideas with examples. We see this for instance in the mining communities of Teruel, León, and Asturias that have been dependent on coal and need to generate a different economic model. It's in these places that we are going to see what the Green New Deal really is and what a just transition means. The move from coal to renewables will need investment, there will be workers who need retraining. When this happens and it becomes clear that at the end of the road jobs are created, the fear will disappear. The green pact isn't about renewables, which are already here, but something different.

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** In the collective imaginary, ecology is perceived as the enemy of employment. We've got to turn this around so that ecology is seen as the friend of employment and the future. It's a response to unemployment and to the pension problem, and it will bring security and stability. It has to be seen as something appealing.

**CRISTINA MONGE:** Let me add that when we say ecology should be appealing, that it ought to be sexy and cool, we have to be very careful because it could become something associated with quality, health, bicycles, and clothes made from recycled plastics aimed at the medium-to-high end of the market. That can be attractive, but it doesn't have transformational capability and generates social inequality.

**FLORENT MARCELLES:** I agree. Political ecology in Spain has to bring together two different electorates if it wants to be hegemonic: the Greens' classic voter base, the educated urban classes with a medium-to-high income level (who have clearly been reached with the message of political ecology), and the popular classes who have different needs. With the latter, it should be inclusive and insist that the fight will be fair or it won't happen. If the Greens in Germany can create a hegemony and overcome the Social Democrats, it will be because they have become a party that is popular beyond the middle classes.

**This nuance is important, not because environmentalism can be considered fashionable among urban middle-to-upper classes, but because the Spanish right is underlining this aspect as a way to gain followers.**

**CRISTINA MONGE:** This is a difficult time for green politics. In the post-election surveys following the May 2019 elections in Madrid, we saw that the Madrid Central low-emission zone had been a decisive factor in former mayor Manuela Carmena losing votes in neighbourhoods on the outskirts where she

had enjoyed strong support before.<sup>2</sup> Madrid Central became a discourse similar to that of the *gilets jaunes*; while the rich could drive around the centre with their electric cars, those on the outskirts lacked adequate public transport and were forced to use older cars. These debates underline how, if the ecological transition is not done in an equitable way, its appeal will be limited to the middle and upper classes of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, and Seville. Ultimately, this is what has happened to Más País, which has suffered as a result of this contradiction.<sup>3</sup>

**FLORENT MARCELLES:** The denialism of the far-right Vox party isn't the main problem. Other right-wing movements, like in France, have incorporated environmentalism into their platform. But in Spain, as we see in Madrid, the Right has lost the battle because it will have to apply Madrid Central anyway.<sup>4</sup> The Right has lost the battle for public opinion when it comes to environmentalism.

**CRISTINA MONGE:** With the Right, yes, but with the far-right I disagree with you there. So long as the transition isn't just, the far right will have a hunting ground. Whenever taxes on

2 The 2019 Madrid local and city council elections saw Manuela Carmena of the left-wing Más Madrid replaced as mayor by centre-right Partido Popular's José Luis Martínez-Almeida with the backing of a centre-right coalition. Carmena's flagship Madrid Central project, which the Right actively campaigned against, sought to reduce air pollution by making the centre off-limits to non-residential cars.

3 The green-left Más País platform was formed by Íñigo Errejón around Más Madrid to contest the November 2019 general election. In some provinces, the party fielded candidates in coalition with the Green party EQUO. It won three seats, two of which with Más País-EQUO. The election saw the governing PSOE party win the most seats while the far-right Vox more than doubled in size to become the country's third most powerful party.

4 Courts have blocked the right-wing bloc's efforts to roll back the Madrid Central low-emissions area on grounds of the negative effects even a temporary suspension would have on health and the environment.

petrol and diesel have been brought up, they have immediately responded asking why those with the least should have to pay. With this *obrerismo* (workerism) they can gain ground as it enables them to reach a sector of the population by opposing policies that address the climate emergency.

**Territorial dynamics are important. In Europe, Green parties are more successful in the north than in the south, and something similar has happened in Spain. What's more, in Spain there is also a territorial identity element because nationalisms, with the Catalan process, have kept environmentalism low on the political agenda.**

**CRISTINA MONGE:** The pattern within Spain is similar to that in Europe overall. The Basque Country in the north is leading the way with a transition plan that has received millions in investment with both public and private funds. This is related to their economic development but also to their political, social, and business culture. In the south, there is a sense of being less dependent on the environment than in the north. In regions like the Basque Country, the post-industrial transition is still fresh in people's minds. Since it went well, they see the green transition as an opportunity and not a threat. In Castile and Andalusia, things played out differently, which is why in these regions it's so important to emphasise the idea of a just transition.

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** The Catalan process has had a negative impact on both the social and ecological agenda. Political ecology should be brave and put the ideas of interdependence and co-dependence at the fore. But beyond this issue, there are two factors that will be important in developing a strong Green party. The government has confirmed that there will be an ecological transition and has a vice presidency for this area as well as a vice presidency for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. If citizens' demands are met in this regard, it will be difficult for a strong party to develop. If, on the other hand, the people are disappointed, the space will open up again. This already happened to PSOE when it failed to deliver on its promises, leading to EQUO's establishment in 2011. The second factor is what is happening on a social level. If youth movements continue to develop and political identity is created beyond what the government does, then we will cement this cultural hegemony.

**What can Europe learn from the Spanish experience? Is there something that could prove useful? Perhaps the 15-M?**

**CRISTINA MONGE:** While they're not the same, 15-M was part of the same cycle as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Nuit debout in France. They gave rise to this new wave of social mobilisation that brought with it Greta Thunberg and created a movement that is in

its prime today. This isn't something limited to Spain, and it has been very influential.

Spain provides various positive examples that demonstrate the importance of a just transition. Not just in the Basque Country, but in other regions too. What's more, we have to cite experiences like those in Madrid with the subsidised retrofitting of rental housing for energy efficiency.

**FLORENT MARCELLESI:** Spain has been a pioneer in its capacity for mobilisation and institutional presence on issues like feminism, in which Spain and Sweden are leaders. The only country in the world that held a mass feminist strike for International Women's Day 2019 was Spain. If we link this with ecology – and this can be done because the ecofeminist current is gaining traction – then it will have an impact in Europe, which in this respect is looking to Spain. The second important issue is municipalism, given how regions and cities are very relevant in the fight against climate change. Many cities have as much, if not more, weight than states and they will have an extremely important role to play in the future.



#### **FLORENT MARCELLESI**

is co-spokesperson and a former MEP for the Spanish Green party EQUO. He is a political ecology researcher and activist, a member of the editorial council of the magazine *Ecología política*, and a member of the think tank Ecopolítica.



#### **CRISTINA MONGE**

is a lecturer of sociology at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, and executive advisor to the Ecology and Development Foundation (Ecodes). She is a political analyst for *El País*, *Cadena SER*, and *Infolibre*. She is author of *15M : un movimiento político para democratizar la sociedad* (2017, Universidad de Zaragoza).



#### **ESTEBAN HERNÁNDEZ**

is a political analyst and head of the opinion section at *El Confidencial*. His books include *El tiempo pervertido* (2018, Akal), *Los límites del deseo* and *El fin de la clase media* (2016 & 2014, Clave Intelectual).



# BREAKING HARD EARTH

## A SOCIAL HISTORY OF GREEN POLITICS IN POLAND

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ARTICLE BY

ADAM OSTOLSKI

40 years of green politics in Poland have seen various strategies attempted, with varying degrees of success. Slow and steady progress has been made but repeated impasses and defeats have called for major changes in direction along the way. The Polish Greens entered Parliament for the first time as part of a broad coalition in October 2019 after an election in which ecology was a central issue. With the environment increasingly a field of contestation between Poland's right-wing government and its opponents, Adam Ostolski looks back on the development of political ecology in Poland to assess the risks and opportunities this new representation may bring.

**I**n Central and Eastern Europe, Poland stands out for having a Green party that has never made it to Parliament as an independent force. At the same time, green politics has long been part of Polish politics and, despite its ups and downs, it certainly has a future. Understanding the impasses that green political activism has reached over more than three decades is crucial for shaping that future.

### LOST IN TRANSITION

In the 1980s, a green wave was rising in Central and Eastern Europe. As depicted in Padraic Kenney's *A Carnival of Revolution*, in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in the region, green movements became increasingly attractive for young activists over the decade. These protest movements mobilised broad support, enjoyed backing from the general public, and were important actors in the run-up

to the negotiated transition in 1989.<sup>1</sup> Green issues were deemed serious enough by both the government and the opposition to secure a “sub-table” in the Round Table transition negotiations, and green activists and experts were indispensable to these talks.<sup>2</sup> Yet, within a few years after 1989, these movements fell into irrelevance – if not oblivion.

The first blow to the environmental movements was born of their own success. The rapid deindustrialisation of the early 1990s, while creating mass unemployment and social disruption, also improved air quality and pollution levels in some of the worst affected regions. The environmental crisis was suddenly much less palpable in everyday life and thus started to be perceived as less urgent. With unemployment the new norm and social problems now matters for individuals, people had other priorities. Research on social attitudes in this period finds a shift from the post-materialist values that were predominant in the 1980s to materialist concerns.

The media climate, too, was far from friendly. The lump delegitimisation of social protest was enshrined in the political culture of Poland’s transitional democracy. Actors instrumental to bringing down authoritarian state socialism

– workers and environmentalists most notably – were first represented as problematic and then demonised by the liberal media as threats to Poland’s fledgling democracy. David Ost’s *The Defeat of Solidarity* documents the treatment of the workers’ movement in these years, a fate also met by green movements.<sup>3</sup>

Mainstream journalism was overtly hostile to environmental concerns. Transition was about modernisation, and back then the discourse of modernisation and Europeanisation left no place for ecology. Reusable bottles associated with communist times were replaced with tetra packs imported from (and gladly sold by) the West. The dominant consensus was that Poland needed more roads and motorways and that large-scale modern farms should replace “backward” peasant agriculture. Ideas put forward by environmentalists for sustainable small-scale agriculture and railway investment were seen as a slap in the face to Poland’s aspiration to be, at last, a truly European country.

## A LEGACY OF DISTRUST

It was under these conditions that a faction of green activists turned their attention to the Ecological Forum within the Freedom Union

1 Padraic Kenney (2002). *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

2 See Ewa Charkiewicz (2008). “The Green Finale of the People’s Republic of Poland”. In Przemysław Sadura (ed.). *Polish Shades of Green: Green Ideas and Political Powers in Poland*. Brussels/Warsaw: Green European Foundation and HBS Warsaw. Available at: <[https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/polish\\_shades\\_of\\_green.pdf](https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/polish_shades_of_green.pdf)>.

3 David Ost (2005). *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. On environmentalists, see Adam Ostolski (2012). “Ökologie, Demokratie und Moderne. Umweltproteste in Polen seit 1989”. In D. Bingen, M. Jarosz, & P.O. Loew (eds). *Legitimation und Protest*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

party. In the mid-1990s, members of this group successfully campaigned from opposition for the inclusion of a “sustainable development” clause in Poland’s new constitution. Adopted in 1997, the Polish Constitution was one of the world’s first to do so. After supporting the liberals at the 1997 elections, environmentalists were rewarded with a deputy minister for the environment post in the cabinet of Jerzy Buzek’s coalition government.

However, the Buzek government continued with megaprojects such as regulating the flow of the Vistula river and the construction of a motorway through the St Anna Mountain national park. The national park became a symbolic cause for the environmental movement and the protests were violently repressed. Protestors climbed trees in an effort to halt the construction as bulldozers pressed on, breaking limbs and ribs.

Not satisfied with dismantling the post-socialist welfare state and hollowing out the labour code, Buzek’s government made the most extensive cuts to the railway network in Polish history. A third of connections were shut down. Small towns and the countryside were the worst affected areas as people were forced to rely on private cars for transportation. As the Polish market was opened up to Europe, old cars (usually of a low environmental standard) were imported cheaply from Germany to meet growing demand.

Perhaps the most significant green achievement of the Buzek government was the closure of several mines in Silesia. The process is hailed by some as an early case of a “just transition”. The closures were negotiated with trade unions and thus relatively peaceful. Miners leaving their jobs received a decent lump sum in compensation. However, no meaningful efforts were made to create new jobs or to design an industrial policy providing an alternative path for the region. This was the era of “the best industrial policy is no industrial policy”. As the money paid to ex-miners dried up, disenchantment with the deal grew and left a legacy of distrust. For the Greens, their only time in government was a lengthy exercise in political irrelevance. The Freedom Union left government in 2000 and lost its seats in the 2001 elections. Neoliberal environmentalism had proved a false friend to the green cause.

## PIONEER SPECIES

The opportunity for another try at party politics came soon enough. In 2003, activists from different social movements came together to form a new party, Zieloni 2004 (Greens 2004). Although environmentalists were among the founders, the heart of the new party was elsewhere. Activists from the ranks of the feminist, LGBT, and anti-war movements shaped the party. With Poland on the verge of joining the EU and European elections coming up in 2004, advisers from the European Green

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family facilitated the process. With the beginning of a new chapter in the history of political ecology, the Green party would try to build a distinctive brand and contest all elections.

Between 2003 and 2015, the Green party's largest success was winning five city and regional councillors in 2010. While the result reinvigorated the party, it was not followed by further electoral achievements. But even though opinion polls throughout the 2000s show a consistently declining interest in the environment, they do not sufficiently explain the party's poor performance. In the same period, the Pirate movement in Poland managed to leave its mark on European policy-making, producing a political party of more than a few dozen members. In 2005, Polish NGOs and activists from the open culture movement were instrumental in bringing down the European Parliament's patent directive. In 2012, people on the streets of Warsaw and across Poland triggered a pan-European wave of protest that led to the rejection of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement on intellectual property.

The answer lies in what sociologists call the Matthew effect: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Bruising campaign after bruising campaign, the new Green party learnt that the system is rigged against newcomers, especially ones short of money. The electoral system in Poland is one of the most difficult to break into in the EU. Legislation introduced in the 1990s sought to stabilise democracy by barring populists and demagogues, and the result is a system that keeps the citizens out.<sup>4</sup> Parties that proved able to climb that mountain were either reincarnations of existing political projects or heavily bankrolled, or both.

The Greens were unable to break into the established political system. They were, however, relevant to the ongoing social change in Poland over these years. In many aspects, the Greens were like a pioneer species

<sup>4</sup> In addition to electoral thresholds, new parties need to collect 100 000 valid signatures with personal data within 30 days to be able to run. Established parties, on the other hand, receive public funds.

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FROM ANY  
PROGRESSIVE  
FORCE

inhabiting a deserted territory. The party worked hard to improve the soil and build the basis for a richer ecosystem but was forced to give way to the stronger species that followed.

In 2003, the Greens were the first party to introduce gender parity across all levels of leadership, something which has since become a normal expectation from any progressive force. Around 2004 to 2005, the Law and Justice (PiS) party started its campaign against gay pride marches (known as “equality marches” in Poland). The Greens and the anti-clerical Racja were the only political parties in the streets alongside the LGBT community as they were met by the far right throwing stones and bottles. The liberal centre, in politics as in the media, was mostly homophobic at the time and often equated the “radicalism” of neo-Nazis with that of sexual minorities.

The only case of the Greens profiting from their commitment to LGBT rights was during the Warsaw elections in 2010, when Krystian Legierski became the first openly gay person elected to public office. Central to Legierski’s campaign was housing policy. A lawyer and entrepreneur, Legierski was the first politician in Poland to address both the demands of the mainly working-class tenants’ movements and the aspirations of the middle class, and to do so with the expertise necessary to dispel any whiff of “populism”. Since that election, housing has become a major topic of political debate at every level of politics.

Around the time of the 2013 COP19 in Warsaw, the Greens were the first to explore the concept of just transition and entered into a dialogue with trade unions – including miners’ unions – about climate policies. At the time, environmental NGOs largely stopped at demonising the miners, while the political establishment perceived EU climate policy a danger to Poland’s national interest. The Greens were also pioneers of municipalism in Poland. Before urban movements appeared as political actors in their own right, the Greens were engaging with anti-road collectives and mobilising people in defence of green spaces.

Ex-Green party members played a crucial role in establishing the Congress of Urban Movements in 2011.

This chapter ends in 2015 with the double victory of PiS in presidential and parliamentary elections. Not just the government but the whole landscape changed. As PiS had reinvented themselves to win, now all political parties had to do the same, Greens included.

## UNCHARTED WATERS

Contrary to the common misconception, it was not the refugee crisis that was responsible for bringing PiS to power in 2015, but the end of transition. Voters had begun to expect more from the political class and PiS was the first to grasp it. No more “painful reforms” or “necessary sacrifice”; people expected their living and working conditions to improve. Around them, people saw new motorways, railway stations, and stadiums – the new infrastructure built on Donald Tusk’s watch. But they also saw school closures, hospital privatisations, and no improvements to working conditions. It was time for the state to do something for them.

So what changed in 2015? First, PiS’s government was the first in living memory to try to deliver on their electoral promises, albeit

with mixed results. For some, this was an outrage. A segment of the liberal-conservative opposition party Civic Platform (PO) voters, identified by sociologist Przemysław Sadura and writer Sławomir Sierakowski as “cynical” PO supporters, expected the situation to return to normal once PO was restored to power. It should be noted that PiS does not take promises more seriously because of any particular trustworthiness; it is compelled to by the new social reality of Poland.

Second, PiS implemented policies responding to the crisis of care. Universal family allowance, raising the minimum wage, lowering the retirement age, the annual “13th pension” payment, school expenditures’ allowances – inconsistent and flawed as some of them are, they provide an answer to the demand that the state should help shoulder the burden of social reproduction. These measures are especially empowering for working-class women in the labour market and give a sense of dignity to many people who feel left behind. It is no coincidence that women are prominent among the “reluctant supporters” of the PiS government.<sup>5</sup>

Third, PiS introduced a controversial reform of the judiciary that triggered a conflict with the opposition (and the EU institutions) over the rule of law and the meaning of democracy.

<sup>5</sup> For more on gender politics in Poland, see Adam Ostolski and Agnieszka Graff. “Gender Ideology and the Crisis of Care in Poland”. *Green European Journal*. 17 December 2019. Available at: < [bit.ly/2w5UgP2](https://bit.ly/2w5UgP2) >.

## THE FIRST PiS GOVERNMENT

## MADE ECOLOGY AN

## ARENA OF POLITICAL

## CONFRONTATION WITH

## A GENERAL ASSAULT ON

## THE ENVIRONMENT

This further divided the Polish political system and created pressure for a unified opposition that limits the scope for independent actors to gain ground.

Fourth, and most importantly, the perception of environmental challenges has changed both in terms of social attitudes and in political discourse. The first PiS government made ecology an arena of political confrontation with a general assault on the environment. This push helped convert PO and the liberal media to green issues, at least rhetorically. The emergence of new climate movements drove ecology further up the agenda. In the 2019 elections, every political party, from the Left to the far right, addressed climate and ecology in their programme – something unprecedented in Polish politics. Their content differed, of course, in ambition, consistency, and trustworthiness, but the mere appearance marked a breakthrough for green politics.

The environmental policies of the two main parties are variously inconsistent. PiS's inconsistency is of the "give with one hand, take with the other" variety. The ruling party has supported solar capacity installation in recent years, its projects to build offshore wind farms in the Baltic appear honest, and its proposals on railway investment seem reasonable.

Yet forests continue to be felled, the government remains devoted to envi-

ronmentally disastrous megaprojects, and they are set against committing to climate neutrality by 2050. PO's inconsistency is found in the difference between words and deeds. While PO members of the European and Polish parliaments can usually be counted on for non-legislative votes, they tend to disappoint in votes of material importance. They have not yet faced a litmus test in the new parliament, so the authenticity of their environmental conversion under Green influence remains unknown.

As for the Greens, disappointed with the Left, they allied themselves with the Civic Platform in the European and parliamentary elections in 2019. They did not gain any MEPs but they did win three seats in the Polish parliament, who now sit with PO. Four ex-Green party members were elected for parties sitting in the Left group.<sup>6</sup> While they do cooperate, this also creates space for healthy competition with regard to furthering the green cause. The official line is that the Greens are, at last, relevant in national politics, have converted their coalition partners to green values, and are preparing to stand on their own lists in future parliamentary elections. Critics say that the Green party has gone full circle.

<sup>6</sup> Of the four elected, two are in the radical-left Razem and two in the left-liberal Wiosna party. This excludes Piotr Gliński, the current minister of culture for PiS and once a member of the Ecological Forum, who publicly disavowed any link to environmentalism.

It finds itself back in the times of the Ecological Forum, greenwashing their coalition partners and risking ideological, if not institutional, assimilation with PO. Is it a step forward or is political ecology in Poland at another impasse? It's too early to call.

While political greenwashing remains a concern for Green parties across Europe, rival articulations of the climate crisis represent an even greater challenge. Against the far-right call to defend “borders and climate” and neoliberal efforts to make the poor pay for the transition, Greens need to defend a distinctive green vision of what climate and ecology mean. Coalition politics becomes urgent and indispensable, but increasingly risky. Whatever was adaptive behaviour for the green species over the last few decades may be adaptive no more. Greens, like all political families, will have to reinvent themselves. At stake is not just the future of Green parties, but the shape of the world to come.

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



# THE GREEN WAVE

## THE VIEW FROM THE PARTIES

The 2019 European elections saw Green parties achieve their best ever result. Their new weight in a fractured European Parliament is an opportunity for progress on climate, democracy and the rule of law, and social justice. Green parties often perform better at European elections but this time the success is sustained elsewhere. Local elections in the UK, national elections in Portugal, government coalitions in Finland, Sweden, and Luxembourg – the Greens are advancing at all levels. The major caveat is that the “green wave” is absent from much of southern and eastern Europe. Here we focus on where political ecology made electoral gains, bringing together analyses of five Green parties to see where they are and to assess their prospects for the years to come.

**European parties at a glance**  
Where the parties sit on the political spectrum (colours do not necessarily correspond to traditional party colours or European affiliation).

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	Far-right nationalist
	Conservative nationalist
	Centre-right and Christian democratic
	Liberal
	Centre-left and social democratic
	Green
	Radical left
	Other

## A STEP UP FOR THE GERMAN GREENS

The German Greens were originally defined by guilt over the Holocaust and World War II, the social liberalisation of 1968, and the anti-nuclear movement. The party was characterised by "Green culture", a minority attitude which assumed the mainstream to be culturally and morally inferior. *Realpolitik* was less important than being seen to be different. This imprinting meant that many important developments passed the Greens by – as in the case of German reunification or the development of a power-political European Union.

This changed decisively with the election of Winfried Kretschmann as prime minister of the Baden-Württemberg region in 2011. The fact that the Greens now had their first prime minister encouraged large sections of the party to move away from their usual "know it all" worldview.

This change in outlook did not reach the federal level until 2018, with the election of Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck as party chairs. They named their first country-wide summer tour "Unity and Justice and Freedom", the title of the national anthem. In the past, state-sceptical Greens would have found this outrageous, but Habeck reinvented them as the defender of the *res publica*, its institutions, and the constitution.

Reinhard Bütikofer, MEP and long-standing chair of the European Greens, divides the party's history into three phases. Phase one represented total opposition ("against"). In phase two, the party became somewhat constructive, entering into coalitions with the Social Democrats, but was seen as narrowly focused on the environment and gender ("for and against"). Now, phase three represents the attempt to become the leading force of a new, heterogeneous majority ("for"). The political backdrop is the failure of the former federal "people's parties" to find an answer to the climate crisis, the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and the dwindling viability of the half-right, half-left politics of compromise to which the Federal Republic owes a good 70 years.

That the Greens will be part of the next government is clear to almost everyone, from German industry to Emmanuel Macron. The question is whether they will play a central role, and what they can achieve in Brussels with the help of the Scandinavian, Benelux, and above all the French governments on socio-environmental transformation, the defence of liberal democracy, and European prosperity and security. Their success in forming majorities in the European Parliament will be crucial. If the German European Greens stay stuck in the second phase and waver between progressive policies and a grotesque "it'd be nice if it were nicer" form of opposition, it could prove problematic. The "green wave" of the EU elections did not apply to the EU parliamentary group. It applied to Baerbock and Habeck alone.



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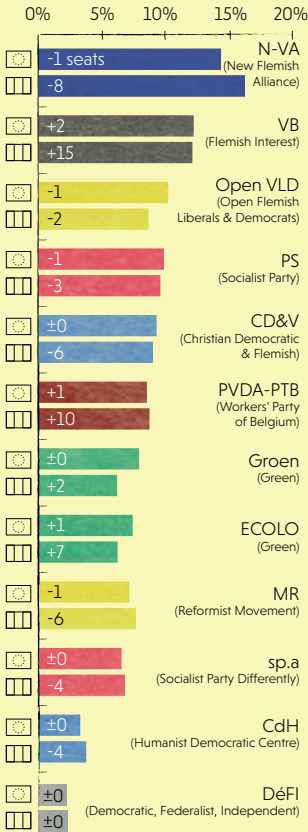


## Belgian European Election, May 26th 2019



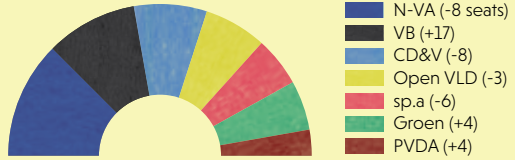
## Federal election, May 26th 2019

SOURCE: Federal Public Services  
Home Affairs



## Flanders Regional Election, May 26th 2019

SOURCE: Federal Public Services Home Affairs



## THE WILD WORLD OF BELGIAN POLITICS

Belgium has two Green parties: the Dutch-speaking Groen in Flanders and Brussels and the French-speaking Ecolo in Wallonia and Brussels. Most observers saw the results of Ecolo as a handsome victory, although the party achieved a few per cent more in 1999 and 2009. The results of Groen were a major disappointment. Given the polls and the prominence of the climate crisis, it had hoped for much more.

Ecolo is a member of the Walloon and French Community governments. Ecolo and Groen are members of the Brussels government and may also participate in the federal government, depending on negotiations in early 2020.

There are two common challenges for both parties. European climate policy has changed significantly in recent months with the new lending policy of the European Investment Bank, new standards for sustainable investment and, especially, the EU Commission's European Green Deal. Despite its questionable coherence – where is agricultural policy? – for many citizens, this appears to be a structural break. Making it clear that tackling the climate crisis requires more than just greening the current economic model here and there will be a major challenge. That climate change is becoming increasingly visible should help both Green parties. Expert report after expert report confirms that intervention is urgent. Young people are likely to take to the streets more often and voices from the world of business calling for a carbon-neutral society are growing louder.

Possible federal government participation poses challenges for both Ecolo and Groen. The next government will be faced with a difficult budgetary situation with little room for manoeuvre. Will the new government be willing and able to pursue a radical climate policy? What about social justice and migration policy? How will these questions play out in a federal government run by an unwieldy coalition of seven or eight parties? Ecolo will be able to point to achievements in Wallonia, Brussels, and the French Community governments. Groen will not have that possibility. In order to convince voters in 2024, both parties will need to develop projects of their own that look to the future and that can counter-balance potential fallout from government participation.

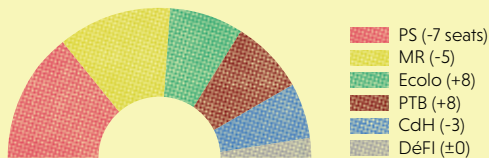


**LUC BARBÉ**

is an expert on Belgian politics and institutions and the author of *La N-VA expliquée aux francophones* (2019, Etopia).

## Wallonia Regional Election, May 26th 2019

SOURCE: Federal Public Services Home Affairs



## Brussels Regional Election, May 26th 2019

SOURCE: Federal Public Services Home Affairs



Groen faces three specific challenges. First, to part of the electorate, the party's message comes across as urban, elitist, and moralising. Other parties do their best to reinforce this impression. The party has been trying to correct that for years, but so far with only modest results. Second, under pressure from extreme right-wing Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) and separatist New Flemish Alliance, diversity and migration have been the most important issues in Flanders for years. Groen positions itself as the radical opposite to these parties and its core voters appreciate that. But other potential voters are deterred by Groen's radicalism. For too many voters, Groen has a disquieting, even threatening, position on both the open/closed society and the climate fault lines. How do you deal with that without giving up your values?

The third challenge for Groen is the tension between the Green programme and science. The trend of fact-checking in the press generally works well for Groen. But on GMOs and 5G, Groen has faced attacks from journalists because, according to them, the scientific foundations of the party's positions are either weak or non-existent. The pressure may increase in the coming years and reduce the party's credibility. Will Groen in 2024 finally become a medium-sized party with the support of 12 to 15 per cent of the electorate? That objective is not yet within reach, but it is a pre-condition for a real place in Flemish party politics.

Ecolo has a specific challenge of its own. In the last year, new movements such as Extinction Rebellion have been organising civil disobedience campaigns in municipalities where Ecolo is in the majority and therefore jointly responsible for policing. Ecolo finds itself on two sides, creating tensions within Ecolo and between Ecolo and movements and citizens. In French-speaking Belgium, the demand for participation and co-management has grown in recent years. Many municipalities organise citizens' committees and the Brussels Parliament has mixed committees of citizens and members of parliament, a radical and innovative initiative. In the coming years, Ecolo has the opportunity to strengthen these dynamics further.

The current context in Belgium offers Ecolo and Groen promising opportunities, as on climate, but also challenges, such as possible government participation. Belgian politics has been unstable for years and election results are volatile, particularly in Flanders. In the next elections in 2024, parties could rise or fall by 5 or 10 per cent. This naturally causes great nervousness in party headquarters. The winners of the next elections will be those parties with a novel and compelling story. Participation in government will improve the image of some parties and seriously damage that of others. Finally, one question is crucial. How can Green parties encourage people who, rightly or wrongly, resent politics because they feel that they are living in a time of social decline to believe in a better future of socially just and inclusive green change?

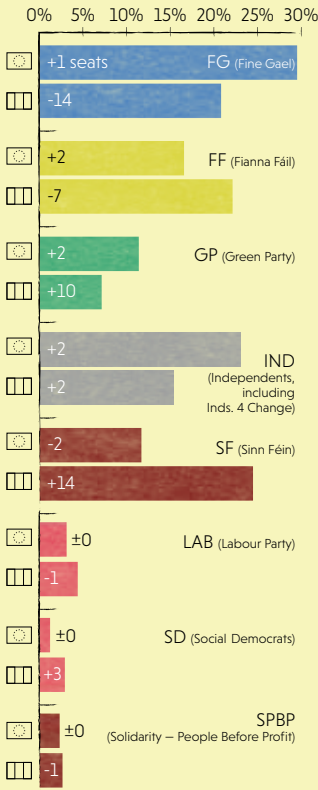


Irish European election,  
May 24th 2019



Irish general election,  
February 8th 2020

SOURCE: *Irish Times*



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## THE GREENS IN A NEW IRELAND

After the elections in February 2020, three parties are near identical in their parliamentary numbers. Comhaontas Glas (the Green Party) is now the fourth largest party. The biggest winners were left-wing Sinn Féin. The most likely scenario is a government with a Fianna Fáil (most seats) – Sinn Féin (most votes) nexus. Though it could depend on independents, a third party would give the coalition greater stability and the Greens will be first approached. At the time of writing, the outcome is uncertain.

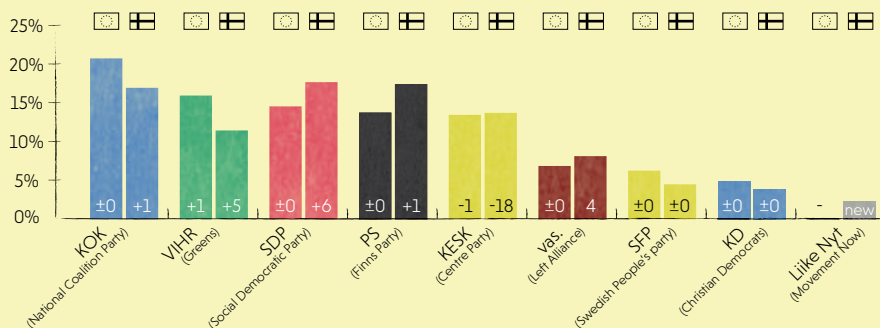
Today seems a long way from March 2011 when, as a member of the Seanad (the upper house), I witnessed a new government elected in the Dáil (the lower house). Some weeks earlier the Greens had left government, precipitating a general election in which the party lost all of its seats. The Greens' first experience of government coincided with the global downturn of 2008. There would be no Green participation in the following parliament. We had been told that government participation had thrown back environmental politics in Ireland by a generation.

Eamon Ryan made himself available to lead the party back from the wilderness. The party returned to its volunteer roots to reorganise. The commitment of these volunteers, especially a newer, younger cohort, proved crucial to the party's revitalisation.

The first electoral tests were local and European elections in 2014. The party won an additional 10 seats in local councils, steady if not spectacular. Green parliamentary representation was restored in the general election of 2016, giving the party access to state funding again. With this support, the party began to professionalise in many areas, including the better management of membership databases, improving social media messaging, and engaging in greater outreach, especially outside of Dublin.

Ireland, whose politics had never been that ideological, was becoming more liberal. Public votes on same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion rights in 2018 saw a new Ireland emerge. This liberalism helped the electorate see the Green Party in a positive light. In the local and European elections of 2019, the party quadrupled local government representation and elected two MEPs.

What the recent successes will mean for the Green political agenda remains to be seen. The main issues on which the election was fought, housing and health, can easily be accommodated between the parties. It is on environmental policy where agreement will be difficult. While Sinn Féin talks approvingly about sustainability, it is committed to infrastructure spending biased towards roads and against public transport and even talks of reducing Ireland's small carbon tax. A 7 per cent yearly reduction in emissions will be Comhaontas Glas's priority for any programme for government.



## A POLARISED FINLAND

The EU elections of 2019 were the Greens' best result to date. The second largest party, the Greens gained two MEP seats and a third one since Brexit. Since then, Heikki Isotalo, press officer of the Finnish Greens, has calculated that support for the old parties has dropped below 50 per cent for the first time based on polling from late 2019. While the Greens have steadily increased their support through the decades, the right-wing populist Finns Party, another "young party", has pocketed between 17.5 and 19 per cent of the vote in the three parliamentary elections since 2011. Finnish politics is highly polarised.

The political divide seems to have moved on from a traditional economic left-right divide to social and cultural issues or identity. Political scientists have named one alternative political axis "GAL-TAN" (Green, Alternative, and Libertarian versus Traditionalist, Authoritarian, and Nationalist). The Greens and Finns benefit from this: Greens stand strongly for climate action, the old parties are on the fence, and the populists are firmly against.

As power has shifted, it is increasingly hard to build a solid coalition government in the Finnish parliament. Two of the old established parties (the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, and the National Coalition Party) are insufficient as a base; now the younger parties have to be accommodated. Future coalitions will have to rely on broad-based cooperation over the left-right divide or always include either the Greens or the Finns Party. A minority government would be another solution, but one that has not been seen in Finnish politics for over 40 years.

The current government includes the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. To oppose the rise of the populist right, Green New Deal policies need to materialise and to be on a scale large enough to change the narrative and to give people hope and trust in a just future. The Greens especially need to deliver now that they are in office.

One fear is that the parties in the coalition will only be able to agree on watered-down solutions. If the Finns Party becomes popular enough, some Centre Party and National Coalition politicians have already hinted at cooperation. These signals were sent even though the Finns and its politicians have become more openly racist since their botched coalition with two more moderate conservative parties from 2015 to 2017.



**Finnish European election, May 26th 2019**

SOURCE: European Parliament



**Finnish general election, April 14th 2019**

SOURCE: Helsinki Times



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# BUILDING BLOCS IN NORTHERN EUROPE

## THE GREENS IN GOVERNMENT

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JENNI KARIMÄKI &  
SANNA SALO**  
BY **SIMON OTJES**

2019 saw broad progressive coalitions come to power across the Nordic countries. In Sweden and Finland, Greens joined social democrats, socialists, and centrists to take national office. Political systems based on cooperation require compromise but determining who to ally with and when always raises critical questions of identity, tactics, and strategy. Simon Otjes sat down with two fellow political scientists to discuss the Green path to government in Finland and Sweden and explain what lessons it may hold for parties approaching power.

**SIMON OTJES:** The Finnish and the Swedish Green parties are both in government as part of progressive coalitions. But despite the similar current situation, Finland and Sweden have very different political systems. How do these parties fit into their wider political landscapes?

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** The history of the Finnish Greens is in line with the history of other Green parties. Throughout the 1990s, the party stabilised its position in Finnish politics and became a normal member of the party system. In 1995, they became the first Green party in government. They learnt how to be in government and to accept that governing requires compromises. Since then, the Finnish Greens have been in coalitions with left-wing parties, such as the Social Democrats and now the Left Alliance, but they have also worked with the centre-right. The Finnish Greens are now a senior government party accustomed to power.

**SANNA SALO:** The Swedish Greens are a more traditional Green party in the sense that they have remained more marginal. This is often attributed to ideological inflexibility. Swedish politics is divided into blocs of left and right and the Greens are part of the left-wing bloc. Whereas Finnish politics is more pragmatic, politics is more ideological in Sweden.

Acting as a minor part of a left-wing bloc has made it difficult for the party to advance its own agenda. Saying that, the Swedish Greens have been rather influential for their size in immigration policy as governments have depended upon their support. For a long time, the Greens moved immigration policy in a more liberal direction, but this has changed in more recent years.

**Is the main difference between the Finnish and Swedish systems the strong bloc politics in Sweden versus the more pragmatic, but chaotic politics in Finland?**

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** Finland has a long and strong tradition of pragmatic, flexible coalition building. These structural differences have had a significant impact also on how the parties act within their party-political systems.

**SANNA SALO:** The Finnish system may appear chaotic, but it is just more flexible. It also reflects the fact that there is no reason per se to think that Green parties would be left-wing parties. Having worked for the Finnish Green party in the late 2000s, I wouldn't say that it was a left-wing party. Some figures were more to the right on social-economic issues and law and order, obviously not the far right but still centrist. It is somewhat surprising that in the European context the Greens are considered to be on the left.

**How do the Greens in Sweden and Finland differ from other parties in those systems?**

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** The Finnish Greens have always resisted positioning themselves on the traditional left-right continuum. Currently they are in a broadly left-wing government but in municipal politics, the Greens have often co-operated with the centre-right National Coalition Party. The Green economic agenda consists of elements from both the left and the right, and staying outside or ahead of the traditional socio-economic cleavage is an integral part of the Green self-image.

The largest difference between the Greens and the left-wing parties is where their support comes from. The left-wing parties have traditionally had support from workers, unions, and factories. This is something that the Greens have never had and, in many ways, never even aspired to have. They are instead supported by young people, women, students, and people with a university education – the traditional Green party base seen elsewhere in Western Europe. This difference has affected the policies that the Greens and the left-wing parties have promoted.

**SANNA SALO:** Left-wing parties and the Greens, in Sweden and Finland as elsewhere, differ regarding the trade-off between growth and employment and saving the climate. The support base of the Social Democrats



comes from heavy industry and the working class who would benefit from preserving the traditional industries. The Greens are all for creative destruction and going forward towards a green world, which would mean death or at least major transformation for these industries. The Social Democrats need to think about their support base and the Greens' goals are therefore very difficult for them.

Saying that, from my research on the radical right, our image of the social-democratic and left-wing party bases is changing. Not only are radical right-wing parties increasingly taking their traditional voters, but the Social Democrats are increasingly mobilising higher-educated segments of society. Whilst the Greens and the radical right are mirror images of each other in terms of their support, the Social Democrats are oscillating between the two and their political offer is a mix of policies directed towards their traditional support and more middle class-oriented measures. In this sense, the support base of the Greens, the Social Democrats, and the left-wing parties are moving closer together.

**What explains the emergence of the Finns Party and the Swedish Democrats? Can these right-wing parties fit into future coalitions and, if not, does it mean that large numbers of voters are politically excluded?**

**SANNA SALO:** The situation in Sweden is unsustainable. The Swedish Democrats

have 25 per cent in the polls and are indeed currently excluded. I'm not making a normative statement, but the reality is that the mainstream right has taken steps towards talking with the Swedish Democrats and are not suffering from the same slump in support as it did last time it tried.

The understanding of support for the Swedish Democrats has evolved. The analysis used to be that it is a single-issue racist party whose supporters are also racists. This view explained the parties' success through individual attitudes to be corrected rather than structural features of Swedish society. Mainstream parties are beginning to recognise their role in inequality, the huge lack of housing, and a very liberal immigration policy and how these trends have fed the growth of the Swedish Democrats. Whether or not they become mainstream, the size of the Swedish Democrats means that they influence coalition building and policy.

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** Finnish political culture has a tradition of either marginalising protest movements or in making them take responsibility as part of a governing coalition. In 2015, the Finns Party already entered government under Timo Soini. This is how Finnish politics works: if a party is big enough and it compromises, it enters government.

Now it's different with Jussi Halla-Aho as the party chair because ethno-nationalistic

tendencies are becoming more prominent in the party. Other Finnish parties will have a lot more difficulty coming to terms with that if they are to cooperate with the Finns Party. But still, if one looks at history, it is very likely that the Finns Party will enter government in the future.

#### **Under what circumstances did the Green parties enter government this time around?**

**SANNA SALO:** In Sweden, the government formation process was messy and took about six months. The Greens certainly weren't winners in the elections. The Swedish Greens suffered a huge setback in June 2018 when the government made a U-turn on immigration policy. Many supporters were dissatisfied, and the party only scraped the threshold, almost dropping out of parliament entirely. It is curious that they went into coalition with the Social Democrats. When your support is so weak, it would be easier to grow quickly in opposition than as a junior coalition partner.

Two things were decisive. First, the Greens were reluctant to work with the Centre Party and the Liberals because they do not trust them on environmental issues, but cooperation on the city level in Stockholm opened the way nationally for a government with the Social Democrats tacitly supported by the Centre Party. Second, ultimately, the current government is the Swedish version of the Grand Coalition to isolate the

radical right. New elections would have likely meant the Swedish Democrats becoming the largest party.

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** Considering the expectations and the result, it was obvious that the Finnish Greens were going to enter government. The real question was how many ministries they would have and what the programme would be like. The Left Alliance and the Social Democrats generally go into governments and opposition together to avoid too much competition between left-wing parties. This time it was clear that the Greens would enter government because the Social Democrats, the Left Alliance, and the Greens share the same kind of social-cultural politics regarding immigration and, particularly the Greens and the Left Alliance, a strong emphasis on environmental politics. It was a bit surprising that the Centre Party chose to remain in government and did not enter opposition to raise their support.

#### **What did the two Green parties secure in the government programmes?**

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** The government programme has the clearest Green stamp of any government ever in Finland. The Greens are pleased with the ambitious entries in the government programme regarding environmental issues and climate action. The biggest differences so far within the government have been between

Greens and the Centre Party on the level of ambition of environmental and climate policy. In the long run, the Greens and Centre Party especially are going to clash on this issue.

**SANNA SALO:** In Sweden, the environmental agenda is ambitious and is continuing the work of the previous government that pushed through a climate law and an aviation tax. But, as in Finland, climate and environmental issues have become rather mainstream. The Greens have the ministries for the environment, housing, equality, and development. The Greens have been very active on the huge lack of affordable housing in Sweden. While the Swedish Greens have more ministers, five in total, the Finnish ministries are weightier, reflecting the fact that the Finnish Greens were a real winner with three times as much support as their Swedish counterparts.

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** The Finnish Greens have the Ministry of Environment, which is the traditional Green post, but for the first time in Finland they also have one of the most important ministries. Pekka Haavisto, two-time minister and two-time party chair, is now the minister for foreign affairs in Finland. Maria Ohisalo, current party chair, is the minister of the interior, which is another new ministry for the Greens. Holding more prominent posts is a testament to strong support and credibility, but there is a potential downside to having to deal with issues that are not essentially green

as they come to your table. The minister of the interior can promote a liberal stance on immigration and emphasise comprehensive security (such as tackling poverty as means to enhance security) but will also have to oversee complicated issues that might not look good politically speaking.

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#### **How do the programmes link environment and social policy to overcome potential tensions between them?**

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**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** Investment in logging plants in central and northern Finland has already been a source of clashes in government. New logging projects would bring jobs to areas that desperately need employment but environmentally the Finnish forests may not be able to bear the scale of logging required. Cutting down large numbers of trees would undermine Finland's ambitious carbon neutrality goals. This issue is yet to be resolved both in government and within public debate.

**SANNA SALO:** The overall framing of the programme in Sweden has been to reach environmental goals in a socially equitable way but it is hard to pinpoint actual examples of how they can be put together. The green revolution has been combined quite successfully with entrepreneurship, however, and this has acted as a bridge between the Greens, the Centre Party, and the Liberals.

**How do you see the prospects for the Finnish Greens and are there any lessons for Green parties elsewhere?**

**JENNI KARIMÄKI:** As long as the socio-cultural cleavage stays prominent, the Greens in Finland will do well as the polar opposites of the Finns Party. As long as issues such as immigration, climate change, equality, and the European Union are politically relevant, the Greens have an opportunity to remain strong and may grow even bigger. In the culturally liberal side of the Finnish political spectrum, they are distinctive and strong compared to the traditional parties that are internally divided regarding socio-cultural issues. The absence of a liberal party in Finland has given the Greens space to offer a distinct ideological perspective. The Finnish tradition of compromise has also benefited the Greens and made them more adaptable. But this is a structural feature of Finnish politics, not something entirely down to the party.

**SANNA SALO:** In Finland, a similar rhetoric of blocs is starting to emerge as in Sweden. The concept of “green-left” is increasingly common. The Finnish Greens have never naturally been part of a left-wing bloc but cooperation with the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance might strengthen this perception. Joining a left-wing bloc may not be good news for the Finnish Greens because ideological flexibility, a distinct profile, and cooperation with different coalition partners have served them well up to now. ■



**JENNI KARIMÄKI**

is senior research fellow at the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku. Her research interests include political ideologies and parties in contemporary history.



**SANNA SALO**

is a post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for European Studies of the University of Helsinki. Her current research is about the strategic competition between the social democratic and populist radical right-wing parties in the Nordic countries.



**SIMON OTJES**

is an assistant professor of political science at Leiden University and researcher at Groningen University.

Previously he worked for the GroenLinks national party head office, the party's research desk, and the parliamentary party.

# GENERATION CLIMATE SPEAKS

## POLITICS FOR A WARMING WORLD

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COORDINATED BY  
**ANNABELLE DAWSON,**  
 editorial assistant  
 at the *Green*  
*European Journal*



When 15-year-old Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg began her notorious strike in August 2018, few would have imagined that little over a year later her solitary crusade would have become a truly global movement. In September 2019's Global Week for Future, millions mobilised from Italy to Canada and from Germany to India to protest political inaction on climate change. Yet this movement – outraged and inspiring – is rooted in a much older tradition and extends far beyond one person's activism. The voices that today demand radical change in the name of future generations are diverse and many. In this panorama, the *Green European Journal* turned to young activists around Europe to ask how they envisage political change in this time of climate emergency, and what their message is to Green parties and movements.

## FINLAND

The era of identity politics must come to an end: it is dangerous for all. It's counterproductive for movements working to halt climate change to try and take possession of the agenda and use it as an instrument to attract voters. Climate cannot be subject to any other agenda; it should be treated as a security question. I hope sufficient majorities can be persuaded to lift the climate question above daily politics. Remaining under 1.5 degrees of warming must become a precondition for all other politics and bargaining taking place in societies. Achieving that requires a long-term programme stretching beyond parliamentary terms.

It is time for all political movements that want to remain relevant to do the visionary and strategic work necessary to put forward their suggestions for which policies are relevant to achieve the necessary emission reductions and build climate-proof economies, and on how state subsidies shape common lifestyles. Currently, very few political parties have done this convincingly.

To regain the trust of the next generation partial solutions must end and the policies suggested must result in real emissions cuts globally. No more shipping out emissions beyond Europe's borders or playing with the numbers. The majority of emissions Europeans produce are consumption-based, but this isn't visible in the figures and needs to be addressed. Coherence in climate policies is a must: currently, climate movements in Finland are campaigning to make the government apply its climate policies to the multinational companies that it owns, which produce more emissions than the state.

If Green parties and movements want to be people's choice for the climate vote, they must be more inclusive. By that, I mean ending the confrontation between people who live in cities and the countryside and educated elites and the working class. In Finland, green movement rhetoric often disparages those who live in rural areas. To be relevant to more people, the Greens should build their identity on something other than setting people against one another. As traditional parties like the Centre Party and the Social Democrats lose their voters – young ones included – mainly to the nationalist Finns Party, it should be understood that playing at identity politics and ridiculing people only encourages this trend. If the opinion polls are anything to go by, the other side is better at it anyway.



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### LAURA KOLEHMAINEN

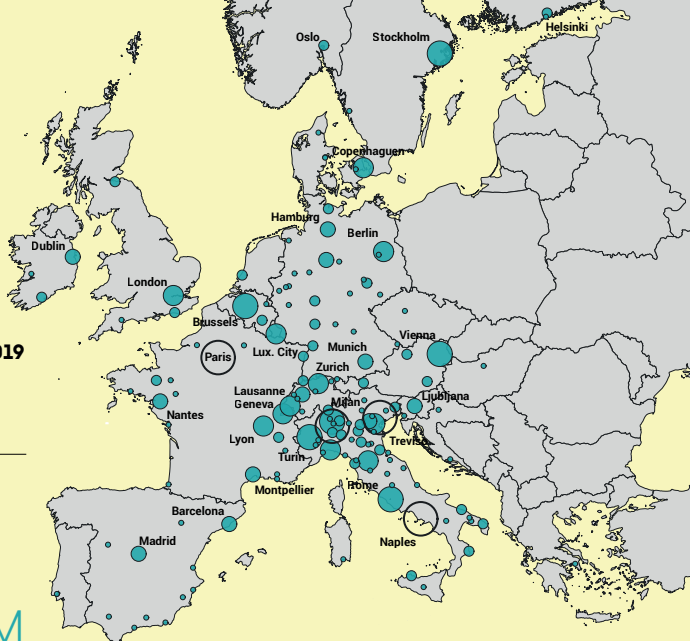
is a 25-year-old law and international politics student from Finland. She founded the country's biggest climate campaign to date, *ilmastoveivi2019*, which demands action on the EU level. She participates in the youth climate movement Climate Move and is preparing a climate litigation case.



## Strikes over 1000 people in March and May 2019 (cumulative values)

by Willy Chevalier / Groupe d'Études Geopolitiques

SOURCES: FridaysForFuture.org and various national newspapers



## BELGIUM

We young people are mobilising to ask the political leaders to listen to scientists and to take action to address the climate crisis. This year's results are disappointing: a failed COP, increased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, no implementation of the Paris Agreement, and discrimination campaigns targeting climate activists. Our system is clearly not ready to adapt and make the changes necessary to fight this crisis. There is a significant gap between the warnings of scientists, young people, and citizens about the necessary transition to a carbon-free society and the lack of action from politicians. As young people, we are worried. Worried that political leaders are not taking the climate crisis seriously. That fossil fuel lobbies and proponents of economic growth influence political decisions so strongly. That economic and political leaders rely on technology rather than mitigation. We are worried about the political blindness on climate justice, and that science is being ignored to the benefit of the few. We urgently need a system that integrates the limitations of our planet's resources and that informs citizens, especially youth, about the urgency of a transition.



### ADÉLAÏDE CHARLIER

was born in 2000 and graduated from high school in Namur, Belgium, last June. She lived in Hanoi for four years, where she became aware of the importance of environmental issues.

She joined the youth climate marches in Belgium in January 2019.

Our actions have definitely had an impact: not a day goes by when the climate crisis is not in the debate. But we did not strike for a change of discourse. We are striking for concrete political actions. The European Commission's Green Deal and its goal to make Europe the first carbon-free continent is a step in the right direction. The challenge will be to go beyond the political mantra and rapidly implement measures to achieve a carbon-free economy by 2050. Here, Green parties have an important role to play in ensuring that the Green Deal is adequately financed and that fossil fuel subsidies are stopped. A role in making the new Common Agricultural Policy coherent with the objective of the Green Deal. A role in shifting to sustainable transport and in developing the next generation of energy systems. A role in convincing the EU Council to support the Parliament and Commission's goal for a transition, and to strengthen citizen participation and democracy.

## UNITED KINGDOM

Moving forward, electoral reform is an important structural change that the UK needs to make. The UK is almost unique in Europe in the use of the first-past-the-post system, which holds back any major advances in green politics. In the 2019 general election, a 60 per cent increase in the Green vote share reflected the effect that the unprecedented climate activism of 2019 had on voter priorities. But in spite of this result, Greens didn't win any more seats. The necessary change in politics will come only when the system allows it.

There is still a long way to go in terms of changing voter priorities. Climate activist movements like the Youth Strike are overwhelmingly organised by under 18s who are ineligible to vote. So not only do we need to extend the franchise and empower young people – who have proven themselves mature and capable – through votes at 16, we also need to influence older voters, especially with an ageing population. We need to close the generational gap – climate change cannot simply be a youth issue.

A key change, but possibly the hardest to bring about is a shift from our societal focus on unlimited economic growth and consumption. Whether on a national, global, or individual level, we need to move away from the idea that this is what brings happiness and success. We will be forced to change our modes of growth and consumption in the near future, but if we choose to make an active shift to a circular economy or implement some kind of a Green New Deal, the cost to ordinary people and workers can be controlled and mitigated.

The most important message of Green movements is one of hope. The sheer scale of action that is required in the face of ecological crisis makes one feel small and isolated. Fear leads to inaction. Despite being the “prophets of doom”, green activist spaces and movements are the most reassuring: realising that you are not facing this alone, that you are not the only person who cares, turns fear into hope for the future. Climate change will require so many steps that “act now” can be misleading. This movement, and the energy behind it, has to last throughout every step of the way.



**LILY FITZGIBBON**

is a 17-year-old climate activist and sixth form student working with Bristol Youth Strike 4 Climate on the organising team.



## HUNGARY

Our only chance to stop the destruction of life on Earth is to step out from our human-centred point of view and liberate ourselves from chasing ever-increasing, joyless material consumption and economic growth. We must fundamentally change our way of thinking because this is the only way to change the future the world is facing: annihilation.

We must stress the compelling necessity of transformative change because, with their talk of clean energy and decarbonisation, today's politicians seem to be engaged in something completely different. They are unaware that these things are not nearly enough. Failure to consider nature and equity means sacrificing them for material welfare and growing GDP.

We need actions that are based on oft-forgotten facts: we are part of nature and we have our limitations. To adapt, we need to implement decentralisation, localisation, and community-based solutions in our daily life. Nonetheless, political decisions and laws are needed to support these procedures.

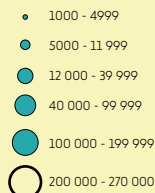
Green parties should not single out the climate crisis as their sole matter of focus, nor should they try to take advantage of growing public attention to climate issues. Instead, they must do everything in their power to enable real solutions to take centre stage. Talking about the complexity and the causes of the problem is crucial: take the initiative to emphasise the overuse and exploitation of our planet, since it shows best that we need transformative change. Show real alternatives to people and help green issues become social issues. Green party politicians need to be up to date with the latest science which identifies the fundamental leverage points that we should put into practice immediately.

As for movements, it is vital to cooperate and to address both politicians and society to achieve change. We must point out both the common values that most of us believe in as well as the absurdities in the way our current world works. Instead of blaming people, we need to encourage them to do what they can while helping them recognise that the problems are systemic. We have to build communities and help people reconnect with nature since profound changes cannot happen without people and society changing too.



### JOHANNA HARTMANN

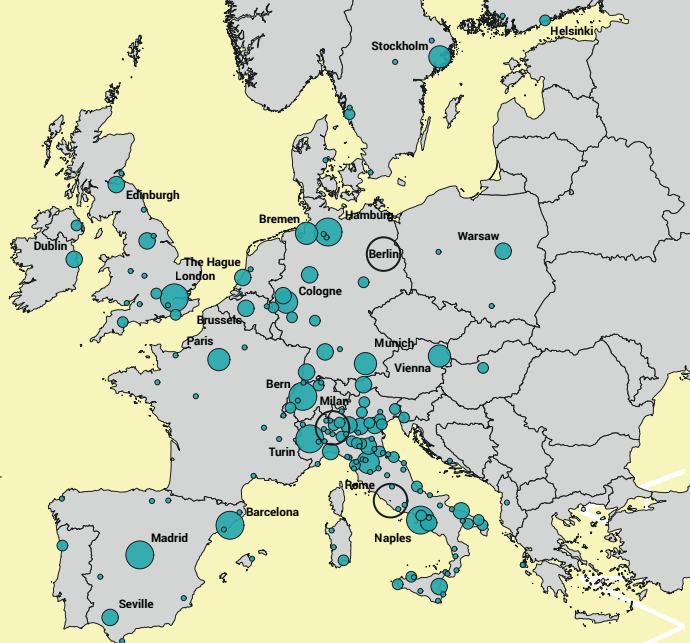
is a 24-year-old biologist from Hungary, currently doing a PhD in commons management in relation to biodiversity conservation. She joined the Fridays for Future movement in Budapest a year ago.



## Strikes over 1000 people during the Week for Future, September 2019

by Willy Chevalier / Groupe d'Études Géopolitiques

SOURCES: FridaysForFuture.org and various national newspapers



## ITALY

Today more than ever, profit is being put before life. Politicians, representatives, and leaders around the world do not want to acknowledge that systemic change is required to save us from climate catastrophe. It is easier for most of our leaders and politicians to imagine the end of the world than the end of our neoliberal system. We must put humanity, and future generations, back in our top political priorities. We must put life before profit.

For this, we need a just transition. Climate justice is social justice. The necessary ecological transition must not be a burden on society and must be paid by the real culprits of the climate crisis. Just 100 companies are accountable for more than 70 per cent of global emissions. These are the ones to be blamed, not people that do not recycle their plastic bags properly.

To fight the climate crisis and meet the 1.5 degrees Celsius Paris goals, we must cut global emissions by at least 7.6 per cent every year for the next decade. But it is not nearly enough to just adhere to the Paris Agreement. Policies must be much more ambitious to combat the climate crisis, and constant consultation with climate scientists and experts must be ensured. It is a matter of assessing the impact on emissions every time a new policy is considered.

Finally, it is important to understand that the climate emergency is not a partisan matter. Political interests must not be put ahead of the climate emergency. We do not care which political party is in power. Whichever party it is, it must acknowledge its responsibilities on the climate emergency and its moral obligation to act concretely and efficiently to prevent the worst consequences of the climate crisis, collaborating with all political parties and consulting experts and climate scientists.

The burden of the climate emergency must not be left on the shoulders of the younger generations, and its consequences must not be paid by the lower tiers of society.



**DAVID WICKER**

is a 15-year-old climate justice activist with Fridays For Future Italia. He is from northern Italy and has been striking weekly for over a year.



**LUIGI FERRIERI CAPUTI**

is a climate activist who has been striking for climate justice since March 2019. He lives in Livorno and studies in Florence, Italy.

# THE CARBON DIVIDE

## THE MATERIAL BASIS OF POLARISATION

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**MARK BLYTH**  
BY **JAMIE KENDRICK**

Politics across the world is shifting, ejecting and transforming established parties as new forces enter the scene. Far-right populism and green politics are now rivals in opposite corners of a polarised political ring. With climate change accelerating and action well overdue, Jamie Kendrick spoke to political economist Mark Blyth about what is at stake. For millions around the world, green policies threaten ways of life that for decades offered, if not prosperity, then protection. Winning those communities over is essential but it will not be easy and will not come cheap.

**JAMIE KENDRICK:** Before we talk about populism, let's talk about how we ended up here. How do you explain the steady decline of centre-left and centre-right parties since the late 1970s?

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**MARK BLYTH:** The post-war regime was very labour friendly: economies were nationally oriented, financial links between countries were limited, and full employment was the policy target of choice. The problem was that over time it produced an inflationary crisis. With no exit option for capital and full employment, wages continued to rise and producers passed the costs onto consumers. But consumers are labour, and so labour militancy emerged and the system destabilised.

The political stabilisers of the post-war regime had been “catch-all parties”. No longer vehicles for class politics, parties in this period sought to represent everybody and competed over the provision of public goods. With the onset of inflationary crisis, supplying those public goods became increasingly hard and eventually something had

to give. What gave was capitalist tolerance for this type of environment and from that point followed the neoliberal revolution.

Under neoliberalism, the post-war centre-left agenda based on the provision of public goods no longer works. The neoliberal era opens up economies and capital is allowed to move to find its highest rate of return, all but eliminating inflationary pressure. The returns to capital begin to rise and the returns to labour begin to fall. In a world where inflation is eating away at real incomes, offering higher taxes for more public goods becomes a hard sell and the Right begins to win support. By the mid-1980s, social democratic parties reach a crisis point. Either they continue to sell the world built in the 1940s through the 1970s or they recognise that that world is changing. But if the world has changed, how do they survive?

**Is it this moment when what you refer to as the "cartel party" emerges?**

**MARK BLYTH:** The notion of the cartel comes in when social democratic parties begin to shadow the right-wing parties by making the same political offer. Left-wing parties stop treating unemployment as a social problem and begin to accept the argument that presents it as an individual problem. From traditionally representing the bottom 20 per cent of the income distribution, they calculate that they are better off capturing votes from the affluent

middle class. This move was a success for the Blairs and the Schröders, but the cost was the abandonment of their core constituencies.

As globalisation progresses, the returns increasingly go to skilled workers, city dwellers, and, by way of the real estate boom, asset holders. Meanwhile, much of the hinterland becomes, to use that Trumpian phrase, "the left-behind". The cartel fights over the same votes by skewing its offer towards the upper-income cohorts while the lower-income cohorts are, in terms of political representation, ignored. By the time of the financial crisis, a great deal of inequality and a lack of representation is built into the system. Already very unstable, the crisis and the bailouts further erode faith in mainstream parties. Cartels are always vulnerable to entrants and this is where populism comes in.

**How did the crisis create the space for populist opposition to the political cartel?**

**MARK BLYTH:** Neoliberalism reconfigured the hardware of capitalism with reform agendas such as central bank independence, international trade agreements, and privatisation. The Reagan and Thatcher revolutions in the 1970s and 1980s recognised that running a full-employment economy generates spiralling inflation, and rebooted the system with new economic ideas. But the neoliberal configuration of the institutions of capitalism had a bug of its own.

IT'S NOT THAT THE  
REPUBLICANS ARE  
IMPERVIOUS TO SCIENCE;  
THEY JUST REPRESENT  
STATES THAT ARE INCREDIBLY  
CARBON-DEPENDENT

Neoliberalism's bugs were the generation of huge leverage in the banking system that could only be reduced by crisis and massive inequality that was masked by credit extension. In 2008, neoliberalism as a system crashed and burned but the political reaction, unlike in the 1980s, was to pretend that everything was fine and ask central bankers to fix the problem. Central banks were able to resuscitate the system by lowering the price of money and buying assets to add liquidity. However, central banks did not and cannot address any of the underlying problems around inequality, lack of opportunity, and immigration.

**Is part of the appeal of populist parties a convincing answer to the trilemma of globalisation, sovereignty, and democracy identified by Dani Rodrik?<sup>1</sup>**

**MARK BLYTH:** The system was put back together again after 2008 but the result is highly constrained and volatile. In a society that many people recognise not to be working, populists are the rogue code writers of the system, sitting in a basement trying to hack new software. Some of that software is good and some is awful, but the fact is that populist parties are writing it because the mainstream programmers refuse to do so.

Dani Rodrik says you can only have two out of globalisation, sovereignty,

and democracy. The EU is an attempt to have globalisation and democracy: it is the world's largest free trade zone and open space for capital, particularly the Eurozone. It is also trying to create a transnational democracy by reinvigorating European participation and becoming more representative. The EU institutions are built to overcome the difficulty that national democratic institutions face containing transnational, often global capital. But these transnational institutions struggle because democracy is inherently national, as shown in the lack of enthusiasm for EU politics and the reluctance to devolve power to the centre. Right-wing populism has a different answer: keep sovereignty and give up on globalisation. "Take back control" is emblematic of that sentiment.

**Right-wing populists aren't the only forces on the rise. So are the Greens, particularly in Germany. Where would you place them between the cartel parties and the populists?**

**MARK BLYTH:** The nightmare political configuration for German capital has always been Red-Red-Green. It's the one scenario that they want to avoid at all costs. Why? Because the German economy is driven by exports, which

<sup>1</sup> Dani Rodrik (2011). *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

means suppressing domestic consumption by repressing wages and relying on foreign demand to make up the shortfall for corporate earnings. Now, with Donald Trump on one side ready to tariff German cars and China threatening to do the same over Huawei 5G, Germany finds itself incredibly vulnerable.

The climate emergency also means that Germany needs to take real steps. In fairness, the German government announced in January a bailout package to wean itself off coal and, on the EU level, the von der Leyen Commission is committing money through the Just Transition Mechanism that will generate 100 billion euros of investment. But despite moving in the right direction, Germany and Europe are heavily constrained by the economic model that they have built themselves. What the Greens suggest they can do, and what the Red-Red-Green alliance would do, is break that model, which is the only way to solve the climate emergency. With the vulnerabilities of an exhausted economic model exposed and the climate emergency worsening, Green parties are emerging as the only safe harbour for young people.

The Greens are increasingly attractive to young people because they do not have faith in the mainstream left-wing parties dominated by older voters that seem to care about pensions more than anything else. Of course, green politics can play out in different ways and a progressive climate change agenda can take various

forms. In Austria, for instance, the Greens just went into coalition with the Conservatives.

**The Left in the US has swung behind the Green New Deal. Can green politics tie enough people together to defeat the right-wing blocs dominating politics in many places?**

**MARK BLYTH:** Every country has parts that are dependent upon carbon extraction and processing. Exiting coal will cost Germany 44 billion euros. Let's say that it would cost the United States 250 billion dollars to do the same. Even if you accept that upfront cost, there is still the question of what coal-dependent states like West Virginia would do instead. Texas may be slowly turning Democrat, according to some projections. But, on the other hand, Texas is oil. If you get out of carbon, the value of the Texan economy essentially falls to zero. The Texans who drive Ford F-150s, live a certain lifestyle, and are quite well off are understandably resistant to this. Adaption is easy for knowledge workers or people in cities with good public transport. But some people's entire way of life will need to be re-engineered in a way that's deeply upsetting and unsettling.

In some areas, the language of the Green New Deal associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders is politically beyond the pale. It's not that the Republicans are impervious to science; they just represent states that are incredibly carbon-dependent. Can they

really be expected to tell their constituents that everything will be fine and that some people in New York have their best interests at heart? Asking someone to give up how they make their living for a thing called the Green New Deal is a big ask. Some version of it has to happen, but the real question is how to make sure people in carbon-heavy states don't pay all of the costs.

**Could the distributional effects of climate policies become a new dividing line? In Germany, Alternative for Germany (AfD) has positioned itself as the diesel party, the polar opposite of the Greens.**

**MARK BLYTH:** Right-wing populists tend to be climate sceptics because their votes come from poorer areas that are carbon-heavy. The AfD's core support comes from the eastern *Länder*, de-industrialised areas that have struggled since the transition, that depend on public spending, and that have been told to tighten their belts for the past 30 years. The AfD gives them a voice.

Australia is another example. Australia is on fire because of rising temperatures that clearly have something to do with us. But the debate is extremely polarised as a result of the Australian political economy. Australia mainly makes its money by selling coal mined in Western Australia to China. Sydney and Melbourne are just where export earnings are reinvested in housing and other assets. Heard from Perth in Western Australia, climate politics sounds like

some people on the other side of the country asking them to foot the bill for their lovely, green lifestyle on the coast. Until the distributions are explicitly changed to overturn that frame, you're not going to get anywhere.

**Is the same carbon cleavage playing out in international politics?**

**MARK BLYTH:** Thomas Oatley is carrying out some wonderful research on the "carbon peace". He argues that the standard account of the liberal international order, from World War II and Bretton Woods to the end of the gold standard and the creation of the World Trade Organization, overlooks how throughout this period, for the first time in history, energy was cheap. The liberal peace was actually a carbon peace and it is beginning to fray.

The countries and regions that are carbon-dependent now have more in common with each other than with those that are not. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. But her support was in New York, the cities of California, a bit in Miami, and a smattering everywhere else. The dependence of Trump's political coalition on carbon is now reflected in American foreign policy. These days the US seems happy to slap tariffs on Scottish whiskey and German cars but to be friendly towards Turkey, which is drilling for oil and gas in the Mediterranean; Russia, a giant carbon-generating institution; and Saudi Arabia, the ultimate petrostate.

Oil and gas are what the US cares about when Trump's carbon coalition captures American politics. The Obamas and the Clintons assembled a very different coalition representing the post-carbon economy. Their approach was to either distance themselves from the problem or reform it in some paternalistic manner that alienates people. The dividing line that is emerging is, simply, are you able to move off carbon or not? That's what everything is boiling down to.

### Can climate denial last in the long run?

**MARK BLYTH:** Denialism is largely over. Now there is a sotto voce version from people like Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison who accepts that climate change is real but argues that radical change can't help the fact that Australia is a hot, dry place that burns a lot. While there might be a half-truth there, the unprecedented magnitude of these fires makes the difference. A bigger obstacle is the "oatmeal trousers" problem: the accusation that climate action means no cars, no planes, and that everyone will be wearing oatmeal trousers. Building a coalition around that kind of vision is just not going to happen. The necessary coalition will have to include not just sceptics but people on the Right who understand that climate change is real but whose lives are built around carbon.

Now the interesting part is compensation. People aren't stupid. When you raise taxes on

diesel for ordinary people but then exempt aviation fuel and marine diesel or cut taxes on the rich, people put two and two together and recognise it as a class politics and that they're on the losing side. What needs to happen is that the people with the assets who live in nice places and who don't have that much to do in terms of transition are going to have to pay a huge chunk of their income. It's going to have to be like the solidarity payments to Eastern Europe but on a global level, across countries and societies.



**MARK BLYTH**

is the William R. Rhodes '57 professor of international economics, at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, at Brown University. He is the author of *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (2013, Oxford University Press) and *The Future of the Euro* (2015, Oxford University Press).



**JAMIE KENDRICK**

is deputy editor-in-chief at the *Green European Journal*.









# RESETTLING VILLAGES, UNSETTLING LIVES

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ARTICLE BY

PAULA CASTRO &  
HANNAH PORADA

Carbon-intensive lignite, commonly called “brown coal”, accounts for more than a fifth of Germany’s energy supply. As the energy transition debate continues, land-intensive extraction processes continue to displace villages across the German lignite belt. Based on their fieldwork, Paula Castro and Hannah Porada analyse the experiences of villagers near the Garzweiler mine in the Rhineland. Faced with a resettlement procedure that fails to account for residents’ multifaceted losses and a government that prioritises the interests of industry over those of citizens, villagers have mobilised to fight both for their homes and for more ambition in German energy policy.

It is a spring Sunday morning in March 2019 when we visit Rosa in her family home.<sup>1</sup> A woman in her early fifties, Rosa radiates calm and strength. Her house is part of an ancient equestrian yard with large adjoining meadows and riding facilities, located in the heart of the village of Kuckum. She leads us to the first floor, where we take a seat in an idyllic conservatory equipped with comfortable wooden furniture and greened by many indoor plants. The sun is shining, birdsong coming in through the open windows. We see Rosa’s daughter making her rounds in the riding arena. At the rear end of the property a small stream flows in front of a forest. But the peaceful and idyllic appearance is deceptive. By 2027, Rosa’s village will have to give way to the Garzweiler lignite mine. Her family will be forced to leave their *Heimat* (homeland), never to return to the house and lush meadows that have been in the family for centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> All names in this article have been changed.

Rosa explains that her family has been negotiating with the mining company for years. They have not reached an agreement as the company is unable to provide an adequate replacement for her family's property. She explains that under German federal mining law, resource extraction is prioritised over the interests of the villagers, who are left with no choice but to resettle. Rosa's daily life is burdened by the resettlement compensation negotiations and the tense atmosphere in the village.

In Rosa's opinion, lignite mines in Germany should no longer be expanding, as the carbon emissions are immense. She expresses her disappointment in politics, referring to the inaction of the national government on climate issues, including the energy transition, and the inability of the regional government to address the hardship her family is experiencing due to the pending resettlement. Rosa has become one of the initiators of a new activist movement, *Alle Dörfer Bleiben* (All Villages Stay), that is led by the threatened villages. Their actions respond to the loss of *Heimat*, economic hardship stemming from the resettlement, decaying social structures in the villages, and the inability of politics to address the local needs of the villagers. The movement also aligns with the national debate on the acceleration of the energy transition to tackle global issues such as climate change.

Rosa's village is one of five villages adjacent to the 48-square-kilometre open-pit lignite mine

Garzweiler II, in the rural part of Erkelenz in western Germany, 20 kilometres from the Dutch border. The expansion of Garzweiler II is planned to usurp the villages by 2035. The villagers are supposed to jointly relocate to newly built settlements not far from their old homes. For now, these new settlements stand in stark contrast to the villages that have grown over centuries, lacking elementary infrastructure and conveying the artificiality of planned development. Signs of human dwelling are absent, green spaces have not had time to flourish, and public places such as playgrounds are still under construction.

There seems to be an incalculable price to be paid for a life in these modern surroundings. Benno, a middle-aged man from the nearby and village of Keyenberg, also threatened, refers to the places of his childhood in Immerath, an Erkelenz village lost to mine expansion in 2018:

*"I was born in Immerath; the hospital where I was born is gone, and the school I went to is gone. Everything is gone. All the places of my past. My passport states a place of birth that no longer exists."*

Benno's words encapsulate the emotional strain of resettlement. The villagers are forced to face losses beyond the material without the capability to challenge them. This speaks of procedural injustice experienced throughout the resettlement process that the government fails to address.

## THE LOSERS OF GERMANY'S LONG AFFAIR WITH COAL

The fate of the Garzweiler villagers is not arbitrary; it is closely linked to the role of coal in the region. As Mr Meier, a farmer from Keyenberg reminisces, people were so poor after World War II that the only goods in their basements during winter were potatoes and coal. Paradoxically, coal – once a sign of security in the cold winter months – has progressively become a source of doubt about their future.

Germany has had a long love affair with large-scale coal extraction. The coal and steel industries were the backbone of Germany's industrialisation at the turn of the 19th century, and hence of Germany's transformation from an agricultural state into a modern industrial state. This trend continued in the aftermath of World War II. Hard coal mined in the regions of North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland fuelled the economic miracle and endorsed West Germany's post-war reintegration into the international political system with the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to the European Union.

Unlike hard coal mining, which was phased out over the last decade as it was no longer profitable, lignite continues to be extracted along the German lignite belt, spanning from the Rhineland in western Germany over the

central German lignite area to the Lusatia region in eastern Germany. In the Rhineland alone, 9000 people are directly or indirectly employed in the lignite sector. However, lignite open pits demand huge areas of land. Since 1950, in the Rhineland alone it has led to a destruction of around 130 villages and to the resettlement of over 40 000 people. The reclamation of land for mining purposes is facilitated by the Federal Mining Act. The law's legitimisation is based on support for a secure supply of raw materials through efficient land concession and licensing procedures.

## GERMANY'S FAILURE TO GO GREEN

Lignite mine expansion and the resulting resettlements in the Rhineland take place in a highly contested political context. International initiatives such as the Paris Agreement and climate justice movements continuously underline the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the central role coal phase-out plays in this. Multiple European countries – France, Italy, and the UK amongst them – have already gone through or announced a coal phase-out by 2030. In contrast, Germany stands out as Europe's biggest carbon emitter. In 2016, Germany accounted for 38 per cent of EU carbon emissions, with almost half of these coming from the Rhenish lignite area.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Europe Beyond Coal. (2019). Data. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from Europe Beyond Coal website: <<https://beyond-coal.eu/data/>>

Quitting coal is thus a hot topic in the debate on how Germany can achieve national and international climate targets. Germany's Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy claims Germany's energy transition strategy (*Energiewende*) is on track to transition from coal, gas, and nuclear power to renewables by 2050. But in 2018, around 35 per cent of Germany's power supply was still obtained from hard coal and lignite.<sup>3</sup>

Laws for climate protection and the expansion of renewable energies have slowed down considerably in recent years. Experts point to the government's inability to assert itself against lobbying by the energy industry and energy-intensive industries. Labour unions emphasised the loss of more than 20 000 jobs in the coal industry at a time when 45 000 jobs in the solar industry were being lost due to Chinese competition and cuts to government incentives.<sup>4</sup> The slow pace of the *Energiewende* makes Germany's compliance with its 2020 climate target for a 40 per cent reduction in carbon emissions less likely.

In response to Germany's failure to promptly phase out coal, protests demanding an end to lignite extraction and denouncing political

inactivity on climate have grown. These protests also support climate justice and holding extractive companies accountable. In 2012, tree-sitting environmental activists occupied the forest next to the Hambach lignite mine in the Rhenish lignite area. They sought to counter its expansion and fight for the survival of the ecologically valuable forest, yet their actions also speak to the broader debate around climate justice and fostering alternative, anti-capitalist ways of living.<sup>5</sup> Since August 2015, the alliance Ende Gelände has been blocking German lignite mining areas several times a year, demanding an immediate exit from coal as well as far-reaching social-ecological change by turning away from fossil capitalism. In 2018, the environmental association BUND won a legal procedure to force a temporary halt to the clearance of the Hambach forest.

In response to increasing political pressure, in June 2018 the German government convened the Coal Commission (the Commission on Growth, Structural Change, and Employment) to discuss an earlier lignite phase-out and develop recommendations for supportive structural policies in Germany's lignite regions. By doing so, the government intended to pursue a shift in its climate policies whilst

<sup>3</sup> Kerstine Appunn. "Coal in Germany". *Clean Energy Wire*. 7 February 2019. See: <[cleanenergywire.org/factsheets/coal-germany](https://cleanenergywire.org/factsheets/coal-germany)>.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Paul Hockenos. "Jobs won, jobs lost – how the Energiewende is transforming the labour market". *Clean Energy Wire*. 30 March 2015; Claus Hecking and Stefan Schultz. "Deutschland hat nur noch 20.000 Braunkohle-Jobs". *Spiegel*. 5 July 2017. Note that figures vary and the numbers cited here represent an average.

<sup>5</sup> See Stine Kroijer (2019). "Slow Rupture: The Art of Sneaking in an Occupied Forest." Martin Holbraad, Bruce Kapferer & Julia F. Sauma (eds). *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*. London: UCL Press. p. 157. Available at: <<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10076047/1/Ruptures.pdf>>.



View of the Garzweiler lignite mine in the Rhineland, Germany. Photograph: Paula Castro and Hannah Porada.

ensuring employment opportunities and moderate structural change. In January 2019, the commission released its final report containing a set of non-binding policy recommendations. Referring to affected villages in the Rhineland, the Commission recommends the regional government to rapidly accomplish resettlement accompanied by a dialogue with villagers experiencing particular social and economic hardship. Yet various environmental associations, anti-lignite activist groups, and the Green party have argued that compliance with the Commission's recommendations would bring an end to the expansion of the lignite mines in the Rhineland, potentially making the resettlement of the Garzweiler villages unnecessary.

In January 2020, the recommendations were cast in a legislative draft, modifying the coal phase-out date from 2045 to 2038. The mining companies would have to be compensated for this shift, leaving a large share of the costs to be paid by the public. The lignite regions are supposed to receive 40 billion euros in financial assistance for the necessary structural

adjustments. The clearance of the Hambach forest for mine expansion shall be stopped, but the draft does not halt the resettlement of villages adjacent to the Garzweiler mine.

## **PROFOUND LOSSES AND NEW DIVIDES**

These resettlements have affected the villagers' daily lives for years, with immense emotional, economic, and social impacts. Rosa and many others refer to their collective future with trepidation, fearing an irreversible collapse of village social structures after moving. These relocations are intended to be carried out within a short period of time, reducing hardships and preserving community. This process – termed “joint resettlement” – is praised as best practice by the mining company and the regional government and intends to address criticisms concerning the social feasibility of resettlements. However, the accounts of villagers like Rosa describe a growing deterioration of social relations in the villages as a result of the resettlements, with deep divides emerging between families, friends, and neighbours.



In response to resettlement-induced losses, the mining company offers a standardised catalogue of monetary compensation. By putting a price tag on people's belongings with a cut-off date, the mining company understands the compensation payments as permanently settling their accounts with those affected. For some villagers this plays out to their advantage, though most deem the compensations unable to account for all the irreparable losses. One villager lamented:

*“Maybe it is fair in the monetary sense, but not regarding our emotions and our attachment to this place.”*

Wolfgang, a villager who has already moved to the new village, describes how every villager has to constantly reconsider their individual trade-offs in the resettlement process, balancing their individual futures against their social commitments and political convictions. While some older people are interested in smaller and more accessible homes that require little maintenance and are suitable for their changing needs, others cannot imagine leaving their *Heimat* for the last years of their lives. For farmers and horse owners, the move means not only a loss of their homes but also their livelihoods. For others, staying in their villages is a political statement, raising a standard against the power of the carbon-intensive mining industry and the political inability of the government

to foster a fast-paced energy transition. The choice to negotiate with the mining company – or not – does not necessarily correspond to agreement with the company's operational goals or to taking a political standpoint against carbon-intensive extractivism. The spectrum of individual reactions to the mine expansion and resettlements reflects a plurality of experiences that the joint resettlement scheme fails to address.

This inability to address the costs to the villagers and the crumbling social fabric of the villages delegitimises a resettlement plan based on the assumption of uniform needs. Yet, in the current political sphere in which mining legislation favours extractive interests over theirs, the villagers are unable to dispute the resettlements and defend their own interests.

## **POLITICAL APPEARANCES IN OVER-BURDENED LOCALITIES**

The legal advantage held by the mining companies regarding the compensation negotiations continues. Federal mining law facilitates mining expansion on inhabited territories, naturally leading to a conflict of interest between the companies and local populations. The actual compensation negotiations, being led by the mining companies, do not contribute to a de-escalation of the situation. This process lacks political control that could grant more procedural justice to



the villagers confronted with drastic impacts on their lives. Multiple advocates of a social-environmental justice stance deem the current legal situation outdated and are demanding an improvement in the legal protection for those affected. There is a need for a democratic double-check of the resettlement process. Monitoring of the compensation process by an impartial elected political panel could be one step in the right direction. However, this solution is rather pragmatic and does not account for the inability of monetary compensation to account for non-material losses. In that sense, a post-resettlement assessment of the villagers' situation could shape further supportive policies.

The villagers bear the heavy economic, emotional, and social costs of Germany's energy production. Germany's interest in economic development puts an over-proportional burden on them. Like many other villagers, a farmer from Berverath reflects on how this burden is paired with a state of legal uncertainty, and how the regional government is mainly trying to keep up appearances in the villages without any real impact:

*"There have been so many politicians visiting the villages already, and Mr Laschet [Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia] has been here as well. I don't understand what this is supposed to change."*

Continuous disappointments have led to political disenchantment and resignation among some of the villagers. Others have chosen a more reformatory approach, trying to engage in communal politics and achieve small-scale improvements. The success of such endeavours is limited. The villagers hold little democratic influence on local political bodies, evidenced by villagers being downgraded to a purely representative function lacking any real power in local committees. Ironically, the participation of the villagers in formal political processes disarms and disqualifies the critique of mining activity, a trend that can be observed in mining conflicts worldwide.<sup>6</sup> A Green party politician from one of the villages expressed his frustration at the "lack of public dialogue" and the evasiveness of politicians on all levels. The Coal Commission's recommendations reinforce this impression, deprioritising the villagers as stakeholders in the coal phase-out. As one villager reflects:

*"The main task of the Coal Commission was to draft a scenario for energy transition, and most of the people taking part in it did not care about the villages."*

Consequently, Rosa and other villagers decided to actively counter formal political processes and founded the activist movement Alle Dörfer Bleiben, which has attempted to

6 See for example Fabiana Li (2015). *Unearthing Conflict*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

draw attention to the villagers' situation since autumn 2018. Not all activists believe that the resettlements can still be prevented, but they aim to send a strong signal to politicians. The movement, similar to Ende Gelände, criticises the government's failure to take more action on climate change and energy transition, and points to the entanglement of political institutions and mining companies.

In the Rhineland, the villagers find themselves in constant limbo – be it legal insecurity, political inconsistencies, or the current status of the resettlement process. Some villagers have left, while others remain. This may lead to unforeseen social dynamics and create new divisions within and between the old and new villages. The emergence of the local activist movement reflects the inability of political institutions to adequately account for these realities and the procedural injustices that the villagers face. Coal phase-out policies need to understand the villages as doubly affected, by both the mining-induced resettlement processes and the energy transition.



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# UNITED WE STAND

## LABOUR AND THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT IN ITALY

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INTERVIEWS WITH  
**FRANCESCA RE DAVID**  
 & **STEFANIA BARCA**  
 BY **LORENZO MARSILI**

Setting advocates of environmental protection against the representatives of workers is a decades-old tactic that only serves the interests of those who care about neither. It overlooks how the victims of environmental hazards usually come from the same working-class communities that trade unions represent, and obscures the long history of environmental and labour struggles winning crucial victories hand in hand. In these two interviews, Lorenzo Marsili brings together perspectives from Italy to ask what ecology means for industry in the 21st century and how the climate movement and trade unions can best act as allies.

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**LORENZO MARSILI:** The Metalworkers' Federation (FIOM) represents workers in some of the most heavily polluting industries, from car manufacturing to steel production. Do you see the need for an ecological and industrial transformation as a threat or an opportunity?

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**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** The relationship between industry and the environment has long been ignored. During the economic boom in the years following World War II, it was completely absent. State holdings were pivotal for Italian heavy industry, so, in theory, companies weren't obliged to think only of their profit margins, but no attention was paid to the impact of production on the environment.

The theme of ecological and social transformation is key to the work of unions today. The social and ecological aspects must be kept together. That this link is often lost speaks to the defeat of the Left in recent decades. Companies pollute, not workers, and "what" is produced is determined by those who hold the levers of power

and control the distribution of production. A socially inclined ecological transformation is a great opportunity to advance rights in the workplace, starting by giving workers a greater say and moving beyond profit maximisation as a sole objective.

**Let me play devil's advocate: it could be argued that your jobs depend on consumerism and the destruction of the planet. The more people consume, the more needs to be produced and the better the negotiating position of workers. How do you break this link?**

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** Trade unions are associations of people whose livelihoods depend on work, as opposed to economic rents. Workers' rights are made up of wages, safety, health, and the possibility of having a say in the workplace. Having a say means determining what is produced and how, as well as the effects this will have on people working or living near the production site. Every phase of transformation and technological development naturally has different effects and transforms the way of working and producing.

It is not that we should no longer produce anything. Rather, we should produce goods in a different way, for example by focusing on recycling and reuse. Globalisation has widened

markets and opportunities. It is right, for instance, for everyone to own a fridge: we cannot think that one part of the world is entitled to household appliances and another part is not.

**The post-war compromise saw an alliance between industrial growth and social protection. Captured in the image of workers driving to the factory in their own car, that compromise has imploded after years of financial capitalism. Do we risk trying to save what is left of it rather than imagining a new approach to wealth production and industrial policy?**

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** Italy has not had an industrial policy since it joined the Eurozone. The European Union, with its emphasis on privatisation, helped erase any idea of industrial policy and Italy, perhaps more than elsewhere, underwent a total conversion to the idea of the self-regulating market. Since then, inequalities have grown and strategic assets have been lost. The iron and steel industry was set up through state intervention but today is controlled by multinationals that do what they want with no commitment to the territory, and often manage to pay their taxes elsewhere. The other striking example is computer science and digital technologies. Olivetti, an Italian company, invented the personal computer but now that whole sector is gone.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Programma 101, the "Perottina", was the first personal computer. Presented in 1965, it was a worldwide success and was used by NASA for the Apollo 11 moon landings in 1969. Olivetti's electronics division had been sold to the American firm General Electric in 1964 but the Italian firm managed to keep the Programma 101 out of the deal.

UNIONS  
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— F. RE DAVID

There is the example of Telecom Italia too. In the 1990s when it was still state run, it invented the SMS and nearly bought Vodafone...

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** Whereas nowadays Italy just transforms other people's products. Italy still has the second largest manufacturing sector in Europe, but the multinationals are overpowering. They decide where to operate and with what impact on social conditions and environmental policies.

**Capital mobility is a powerful weapon in defeating social and environmental demands and also fuels the nationalist right. What is the progressive approach to tackling offshoring and dumping?**

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** We must learn to work at the European level. It is paradoxical that EU funds channelled to support poorer countries often produce industrial relocations that impoverish workers in contributing countries. The much-discussed crisis is not an actual industrial crisis because the companies are growing through shifting production. It's a crisis of fair labour and competition. The European trade union movement has not given a convincing answer to this situation in recent years. Since the early 2000s, FIOM has held talks to encourage our partners to form a common European union but we still do not have one. Individual national unions manage all the processes at the European level.

**Hundreds of thousands of climate marchers are taking to the streets and they often seem detached from the traditional concerns of labour. Can the worlds of trade unions and new ecological movements speak to one other?**

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** This movement is a great opportunity whatever the contradictions. An ecological movement that was indifferent or in opposition to industry would be unable to get to the heart of the challenge. I have met representatives of environmental movements who have asked me to close down car plants. But if I represent workers,

the question cannot be one of closure but the transformation of the production line. Unions and new ecological movements need a frank exchange to find elements of synergy and mutual growth. Only by restoring dignity to work can we build new power relations that can change the conditions of production. If we do not manage, capital will continue to win and pursue profit maximisation at all costs. The world is not divided between ecologists and workers who like to pollute. The world is divided between the exploiters and the exploited, between capital and labour. On some things, we need to get back to basics.

**The far right is rising in Italy, while the government is unpopular and lacking any vision for change. Could the trade unions contribute to such a vision? Maybe it's time to bring back demands such as full employment and working time reduction?**

**FRANCESCA RE DAVID:** People are turning to the Right because abandonment and poverty fuel anger. The priority is restoring the value and dignity of labour, in whatever sector. Ken Loach's latest film about a delivery driver, *Sorry We Missed You*, gives us a measure of how lonely working in the gig economy can be. So yes, we must speak about full employment and, particularly with today's technology, reducing working hours. The benefits of innovation cannot all be left in the hands of those who control capital and the machines.

Wages for Italian metalworkers have remained stagnant since 2008, while companies' profits have doubled. These profits did not go to investments in environmental transformation, higher salaries, or shorter working hours. They go to rent and dividends. ■

**LORENZO MARSILI:** It should be obvious that social and ecological inequalities must be treated as one. Why is it so often not the case?

**STEFANIA BARCA:** This has been the case for a very long time, but not always and not completely. The global climate movement today is making it increasingly clear that this struggle is one for global justice. In a world where people and places are valued equally, industrial hazards cannot be dumped on workers and working-class communities, racialised and indigenous people, or ecosystems.

The labour issue is at the core of the ecological contradiction and avoiding addressing it can only hamper the best efforts of environmental movements. This fact is increasingly acknowledged on both sides as we witness an epochal shift in terms of ecological awareness. Until a few years ago, the mainstream response was that of greening the economy via market-based and technological solutions. 25 years of failed COP meetings and alarming scientific reports have made it clear that this model has failed, and the same applies to the jobs versus environment dilemma. Markets and

technologies are not solving the ecological crisis but are failing workers and environment alike. After decades of neoliberal propaganda that convinced everyone – Left and Right – that “there is no alternative”, people are finally recognising that alternatives are precisely what we need.

### **Can we learn from past struggles that tied together labour and environmental demands?**

**STEFANIA BARCA:** Globally speaking, the stricter regulation of industrial hazards that the international trade union movement managed to impose throughout the last century represents a major achievement. The golden age of labour environmentalism was the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1970 Labour Statute, Italian unions imposed direct worker control over various risk factors on the shop floor, including physical, chemical, and radioactive hazards. The unions then struggled to extend the right to health to the Italian population in general. The National Health Service was established in 1978 and was also responsible for monitoring industrial hazards. In the same period, the most powerful trade union in the US, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, lobbied Congress to pass some of the US’s first and most important pieces of anti-pollution legislation: the Clean Air Act in 1963, the Clean Water Act in 1972, and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. The new public agency was

tasked with enforcing the right to a safe and healthy environment for all American citizens. However, occupational and environmental rights have often remained “paper rights”. Due to resistance from both governments and corporations, implementation has been weak and requires constant mobilisation on the part of unions. Unfortunately, unions have not kept their environmentalist promises and such mobilisation has diminished over the past two or three decades. The moment has come for critical self-reflection and a thorough reconsideration of their priorities.

### **How should we go about ensuring greater involvement of workers and their representatives in the ecological transformation?**

**STEFANIA BARCA:** Many trade unions and international confederations are discussing this question. “Just transition”, the trade union movement’s strategy for the climate crisis, was put forward in the early 2000s. The idea is beautiful in its simplicity: the cost of a post-carbon transition must not be paid by workers. This is also in line with the environmental justice principles that the climate movement follows, so convergence is already happening on the ground in many places. Not everywhere, however. Nobody has heard of just transition in Taranto or even in Italy for the most part. With respect to the ILVA plant in Taranto, trade unions at the local and national levels have largely accepted the

LOOKING AT  
THE CLIMATE  
CRISIS IN CLASS  
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OF CAPITAL  
VERSUS LIFE  
– S. BARCA

work versus environment trade-off.<sup>2</sup> The results are a staggering number of accidents, occupational illnesses, and a public health disaster in the community, all documented by the highest scientific authorities in the county. Sadly, labour environmentalism has failed Taranto and many other working-class communities. Not only that, it has also failed the general public interest for the pursuit of a development model that sacrifices environmental and public health for industrial production and GDP growth. The wider political economy is of course important. Italy's governing elites have been very reluctant to regulate industry and even to have an industrial plan. But we will never progress if unions do not acknowledge their cultural complicity. They bought into the toxic narrative that sees industrial production as the single most important driver of social wellbeing. Only if a new generation of union representatives feel encouraged and pressed to take up this epochal challenge – environmental justice – and make it their struggle, a struggle that has everything to do with the wellbeing of workers and working-class people, can I see the possibility for real change.

**We suffer the effects of a biopolitics that has produced the idea of homo economicus and a collective complicity in growth through hyper-consumption. How can we break this mechanism?**

**STEFANIA BARCA:** Putting labour rights at the centre of environmental campaigning is crucial. If workers' rights – from safety to living wages – could not be systematically infringed upon, then cheap commodities would not exist. In a globalised economy, this could only be effective if applied on the global scale. However, transnational corporations and the World Trade Organization are not omnipotent and true labour internationalism and solidarity could achieve a great deal, as the history of successful strategies and campaigns shows. Labour was a powerful

2. The ILVA plant is Europe's biggest steelworks. Approximately 20 000 people work there or as part of the supply chain. Located close to the centre of Taranto, the plant's toxic emissions cause high cancer and respiratory disease rates in the area. In 2019, Luxembourg-based Indian steel giant ArcelorMittal announced that it was pulling out due to the high refurbishment costs needed to improve environmental standards. The Italian state is considering a bailout.



global economic actor before the neoliberal backlash, and this is the historical moment for it to regain that role. The world is not divided into workers and environmentalists, as common sense once had it. But what today's global climate movement tells us is that the world is not divided into capital and labour in the old sense either. Wage labour is only a fraction of the world's proletariat and industrial wage labour a tiny fraction within it.

Looking at the climate crisis in class terms means reframing class conflict in terms of capital versus life. Labour movements could be on the right side of history, as International Trade Union Confederation official Anabella Rosenberg has claimed, but only if they free themselves from capitalist realism – the idea that there is no alternative – and start to act according to global ecological class consciousness.

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# AFTER INDUSTRIALISM

## REVIVING NATURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ARTICLE BY

REINHARD  
OLSCHANSKI

Ecologism as a school of thought emerges as a critique of industrialism, the ideology that binds liberalism, conservatism, and socialism. It develops these three dominant political traditions by recognising nature as the basis for the human's existence and development. Two decades into a 21st century already defined by the crisis of the human in nature, the ecologisation of human society is an urgent imperative.

**H**ardly anything escaped the titanic forces of industrial modernity. It ploughed up the world and created it anew. It shaped a way of thinking that sees everything as dominated by the kinematic principles of machines. Humanity too became a kind of machine, with the relationship between the mind and the brain resembling that of bile and the gall bladder. The human spirit was banished, separated from the material world, which was subject to human control as a subordinate or yet to be subordinated space. One consequence of the naturalisation of human existence, or perhaps its banishment from nature, was the forgetting of the body.

DE

This article is available in its  
original language (German)  
on the *Green European*  
Journal website

### INDUSTRIALISMUS ALS WELTANSCHAUUNG UND DIE ÖKOLOGISCHE FRAGE

Reinhard Olschanski  
betrachtet wie  
Ökologismus als  
vierter Weg neben den  
dominierenden politischen  
Traditionen zutage tritt  
– als der einzige der  
zu Sicherheit führt.

### THE SUPPRESSION OF THE ECOLOGICAL QUESTION

The great political concepts – liberalism, conservatism, socialism – were deeply influenced by industrialism. In the struggle over socialism, the market economy, and the “Third Way”, that human dominance over nature could be extended indefinitely was common sense. Since the emergence of great industry in the 19th century, industrialism has been the true ideology of the epoch, tying the three main political traditions and their representatives closer together than they ever thought possible.

This common foundation came into view wherever they evaded the ecological question. For example, in a Marxism that rejected ecological thinking as a fallacious critique tainted by mysticism because of its focus on the effects of modern technology on the environment and its out-of-hand rejection of nuclear power. Anyone guilty of this could only be a romantic and naïve technological pessimist, or worse, a Luddite. They had failed to understand that the “social determination of form”, the bourgeois system of property relations within which technology is used, is the real problem. This critique of ecology went so far as to claim that socialist nuclear power plants were safe because they were run to serve the wellbeing of the people, not capitalist desire for profit. The nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl stands as a memorial to this way of thinking. It revealed that not only the defects of actually existing socialism had been ignored, but also the dangers inherent in the large-scale technology of nuclear power as such.

Industrialism has many faces. Western social democracy, too, was permeated by it. Industrialism fought for nuclear power, rebuilt cities for cars not people, and – to this day – obstructs a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels. Western conservatives and liberals reversed the Marxist argument about the social determination of form. In their view, the dangers of nuclear power were not down to the capitalist profit motive but “socialist inefficiency”. Fukushima proved to be the Chernobyl of market-liberal industrialism.

## THE CRITIQUE OF INSTRUMENTALISM

But industrialism was not limited to such short-sighted forms. Much of the agenda put forward by the contemporary ecology movement was already prefigured during the golden age of industrialism. It can be found in the German late-19th century *Lebensreform* (life reform) movement. Or later in the sports and hiking trends that drew people away from the grey cities into the tamed wild of the Great Outdoors. Or in the *Reformarchitektur* (architecture of reform) movement in the early 1900s that brought air and sunlight into workers’ districts.

Philosophy too recognised the costs of modern industrialism. Starting with Romanticism and its aesthetic discovery of nature, via several variants of conservative cultural criticism, through to critical theory and the Frankfurt School, a thread questioning the model of progress and enlightenment associated with modernity can be followed. As different as these approaches were, what they shared was an attempt to assert an otherness to the instrumentalist-industrialist rationale of a kind that had been forgotten and repressed in the course of progress.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* traced how the Enlightenment turned away from its original humanist ideals to arrive at a functional and

instrumental rationalism, paving the way for technocracy, fascism, and tyranny. Related perspectives from the wider Frankfurt School are found in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and in Erich Fromm's *To Have or to Be?*.

The 1960s, the peak of the glorious golden years of growth, saw a strong revival of the conservative cultural critique of industrialism of the kind found in Arnold Gehlen's 1957 *Man in the Age of Technology*. Those who would prefer not to relate to Martin Heidegger's critique of technical thinking and the limits of the Enlightenment might prefer Karl Marx as a firmer starting point for ecological thinking. For all his admiration of modern productive forces, Marx knew very well that the human is and remains a part of nature. Indeed, the human is that special part of nature in which it becomes aware of itself. Ecological philosophy should take up this thought, found above all in Marx's early writings, and develop it further. It should define itself as a philosophy that deals in depth with how nature, as human, encounters itself in practice and in theory.

The chain of thought that results from this understanding is not straightforward. It reminds us that human existence belongs in a continuum, given its context in nature. As an undeniably natural being, humans are part of the causal chains and relationships in which everything that exists is reflected in everything else that exists. At the same time, ecological

thinking accentuates the difference resulting from the human's conscious and purposeful awareness of its natural context. Humanity is nature, but within nature, it puts itself in an eccentric position. Humanity cannot escape nature, but neither is it rigidly determined by it.

Ecological critique is concerned with the blind spots of human intervention in nature and its repercussions, on nature as on society. It highlights how, first, nature is not simply building blocks of inert matter but a self-reflexive continuum of networks and complex chains. Second, how the human itself is a natural being by virtue of being flesh and blood. And third, that by intervening in nature the human is ultimately intervening in itself.

## WORK AS A METABOLIC PROCESS INVOLVING NATURE

Human existence explicitly refers back to nature. In contrast to the relationship between animals and nature, humans make use of resources, tools, and techniques that are not merely found but are created specifically for a purpose. These instruments objectify human productive ends. A technical-cultural world emerges in which a way of living and interacting with nature is established and passed down through time.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger showed how the relationship with nature, mediated by tools,



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is realised through routinised and ingrained contexts of meaning. Only when something is missing in the work process and is no longer on hand do these contexts come into question. To go a step further, an additional degree of alienation arises when everything necessary for success is on hand but the act of engaging with nature nevertheless fails. In this alienation, not only does the organising context of meaning become problematic but also the resistances and frictions that eluded the preceding structuring of meaning. Human engagement with nature encounters a hard residue that cannot be foreseen or interpreted away. Immanuel Kant referred to that residue as “thing-in-itself”, a largely hidden otherness that must always be taken into account.

Ecological thinking recognises this otherness in the relationship with nature. It accounts for adversity and obstacles, especially those that occur at an advanced level of industrial production. But the basic categories from which it develops can already be discerned in simple manual work. The elemental human engagement with nature – the practical synthesis in manual work that unites purposeful action, instrument, and the object of work – is thus the starting point for ecological reflection. The otherness appears wherever the thing does not want to do what the human wants it to do: when a form breaks before it can be given its intended shape or when the hammer strikes the finger rather than the nail. Even such small forms of adversity tend to be met with abstraction that ignores the reality of engagement with nature, to consider work as if it were exclusively a matter of ideas to be fashioned seamlessly in a product. A perspective that takes work to be a concrete form of engagement with nature, on the other hand, appreciates that a great deal happens on the journey from the possible, the preconceived purpose, to the actual, the product. From a simple engagement with nature, ecological critique learns that things often turn out differently than expected.

More specifically, ecological critique is concerned with that aspect of otherness that recalls how nature is more than matter at humanity’s disposal. Nature encompasses both the human worker and the society

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to which they belong. The resulting frictions were already present in pre-modern forms of production, as in the toxic effects of dyes that decimated craftspeople and tanners for centuries and turned entire quarters of pre-modern cities into ecological no-go areas. The more far-reaching impacts characteristic of modern industry's engagement with nature have their own long heritage, as in the ongoing process of deforestation that stretches back to ancient times. Such examples are no longer a matter of individual things and their particular difficulties, but of the repercussions of the general over-exploitation of nature that causes ecological systems to collapse and leaves landscapes desolate. Drawing on deforestation, Jean-Paul Sartre developed an important concept of ecological thinking, the "contra-finality", to refer to the spatially and temporally extensive consequences of human engagement and their repercussions.

## WE ARE NATURE

Ecological thinking reminds us, individually and collectively, that nature is the basis of human existence. When applied politically and practically, it becomes a defence of nature whereby – emphatically speaking – nature defends itself. This extended understanding of nature is echoed in the activist slogan first heard in Australia in the 1970s: "We are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself."

This is not to be understood in the sense of a naturalised engagement. Rather, the self-defence of nature refers to the dual process by which an impersonal and unconscious counter-finality visits revenge on the human instigators of ecological crisis to make them aware of their place in a wider context.

Human flesh and blood form the basis of this connection – that part of nature that centres human existence. They are the medium, torn apart into subjectivity and objectivity by modern industrialism, the basis that makes knowledge of what humanity is doing an urgent imperative.

## BECOMING ECOLOGICAL

For a long time, the parties of old industrialism regarded ecological thinking as “post-materialist”, a way of thinking for the children of the bourgeoisie, First World problems. They constructed an opposition with ecology on one side and economics and social justice on the other. Ecological demands, according to this view, spelt economic ruin and robbed workers of their hard-earned money. This industrialist International spanned all camps and blocs, visible for decades in the alliance of Social and Christian Democrats protecting the car industry against environmental legislation.

Now, it is clear that ecological thinking situates the human in the modern world far more accurately than old industrialism ever did, with its propensity to abstract away from the effects of humanity’s engagement with nature. With regard to the social question, climate change has confirmed Friedrich Engels’s insight from *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: the poorest of the poor are always the first victims of ecological crises.

Traditional industrialism is already history in many developed countries. Swathes of the old industries have shut down, leaving rust belts in their place. Globalisation has shifted much of production to the Global South, while the service sector has expanded. Automation and digitalisation are transforming the industries that remain. This upheaval is full of opportunities and dangers.

The ecological turn is therefore a major opportunity; its absence a great threat. Green parties represent that concern. Meanwhile, traditional parties from the old triad of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism are modifying their stances. Economy and ecology are no longer understood as being in opposition but as cumulative, though usually in a half-hearted way that adds the ecological to economic only where possible. Yet the traditional parties are well placed to frame ecological aspirations much more radically.

Conservatives could recall the forgotten principle of “the preservation of creation”. Liberals could identify the market forces that could drive an ecological transition. Socialists could criticise the culture of accumulation standing in the way of such a shift. For their part, Greens need to understand the state apparatus better to allow its gradual and radical transformation towards the inclusion of nature. The ecologisation of the state is a fundamental condition for a successful paradigm shift.

What is needed is a change in the parameters to make ecology decisive for the economy and industry, the battleground on which the struggle over tomorrow’s technologies and products will be fought. Clever entrepreneurs and far-sighted trade unionists have long understood this challenge but often remained minority voices. For many scientists and



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engineers, the ecological agenda has long been part of their professional ethos. The parties of old industrialism have considerable catching up to do.

### **POPULISM AND ZOMBIE INDUSTRIALISM**

A third position has now emerged. It does not question the thesis of opposition between ecology and economy but strengthens and refines it, merging the rejection of migrants, feminists, and ecologists into the same reactionary chorus. It seeks to counter the ecological agenda with a “zombie industrialism”. Its advocates sit in the White House and the administrations of other countries under right-wing populist rule. Many more around the world prepare for an anti-ecological roll-back.

Populists are acting as cheerleaders for the carbon lobby, for unbridled calls to “Drill, baby, drill!” They fight for a radicalised extractivism and against decarbonisation. They blow open the path for fracking to squeeze the last drops of oil out of the planet. Following in their wake, industrial agriculture and mass cattle farming are contributing to climate change and the greatest mass species extinction since the end of the dinosaurs.

The social question appears to have been neglected once again. In the rare earth mines of the Global South, archaically exploited workers extract raw materials for advanced products found in high-tech countries. In the Global North, ethnic discrimination and exclusion have re-emerged. “Foreigners” are forced out to save resources for “our people”. It’s not only the relationship between human and nature that is being brutalised, but that between people too.

### **ONCE MORE: MASTER-SLAVE**

To unpick the method behind the coincidence of these two brutalisations, it is worth returning to Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s master-slave

dialectic. What can be abstracted from the resistance of things, which is what leads to the ecological question disappearing from view, is shown by Hegel to be part of a social relationship. It is the position of the master, who, unlike his slave, has little to do with the business of introducing purposes into things. Hegel's master is not an innovative entrepreneur but someone who subjugates and enslaves both human and nature, just as slave owners and feudal lords used to do. The archaic subjugation of human and nature has not disappeared under modernity. It was an element of its rise in the form of "primitive accumulation". Colonialism, slavery in the USA, and contemporary working conditions in many regions of the Global South are further examples. As is the militarisation of labour during Stalin's industrialisation drive. Or the same militarisation under National Socialism that fought nature on an industrial "labour front" when it was not practising the annihilation of life through labour.

Today's zombie industrialism combines ecological and social recklessness with a tendency to create mythicised enemies and fantasies of violence. Ecological activists are no longer simply naïve post-materialists but "climate Nazis", as a German politician of the extreme right put it. They are monstrous children of evil to be driven out together with migrants, refugees, and Muslims. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who threatens the remaining rainforests with ruthless slash-and-burn

agriculture, follows the same line when he claims that it was environmentalists who set the jungles on fire.

Cloaked and fired up by populism, industrialism is arming itself for the final battle. It wants, in a radical step, to exclude all of the ecological and social costs of production. As it destroys nature and disintegrates societies, industrialism is declaring, "*Après moi, le déluge*". The price is to be paid by posterity. In the pursuit of short-term profit, industrialism risks the end of the world as we know it. This calls for a resistance that can unite social, economic, and ecological common sense. An alliance for democracy and sustainability, against the new barbarians of populism and zombie industrialism, is the great mission of our time. The task for Green parties and movements is clear.



#### REINHARD OLSCHANSKI

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# *A Legal Revolution for the Rights of Nature*

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A legal system that prioritises the conservation of the living world over private property would be a powerful tool for ecological transition. Valérie Cabanes, co-founder of French non-profit Notre Affaire à Tous, makes the case for enshrining the rights of nature and the crime of ecocide in law.

**T**hrust into the public arena by major disasters, be they industrial or produced by the extremes of climate change, environmental protection now seems to be everyone's concern. But what does it mean exactly? What does environmental protection protect? Resources? Landscapes? Human communities?

Since the 1950s, there has been a growing collective awareness of the threats posed to natural resources and of the damage suffered by the environment. From this, environmental law has emerged as a tool to defend the weakest in society, to protect an entity that is alive, but not human. It is a means of establishing prohibitions, of placing restrictions on certain actions whose consequences would make humans and the planet potential "victims".

But environmental law grew out of the existing, completely anthropocentric legal framework: subjects in law are humans or their extensions (businesses or charities, for example). Furthermore, as products of the political, social, and cultural trends and power dynamics of the societies it governs, the law and its branches evolve – often in opposition to one another. As economic and financial globalisation has accelerated over the past few decades, commercial law has increasingly shirked its responsibilities towards the environment. This abusive relationship urgently needs to be rebalanced to treat ecosystems as victims, and acknowledge the rights of nature in the face of attacks perpetuated by the system of private property rights and commercial law.

Quite simply, we must recognise the rights of nature. This means changing our core values, inverting the hierarchy

of norms. The recognition of planetary boundaries (today used to evaluate whether sustainable development objectives are being met) and the rights of nature in domestic and international law would subject commercial law and industrial activities to a legally binding framework. Hence the need for recognition of the crime of ecocide for actions that cause the most serious harm to natural commons and ecosystems. By recognising the rights of nature and its role in our ecosystems, we can safeguard our fundamental rights to water, air, food, health – and even habitat, because today climate change is pushing hundreds of millions of people to leave their homes in a wave of forced migration.

This need for rights of nature is tied in with the notion of urgency. Faced with a politics of gradualism that handles the current economic system with care, nudging it towards ecological transition through tax or moral incentives and individual voluntarism, the law can be a real and effective tool for transforming society.

## **PROTECTING THE NON-HUMAN**

Current environmental law is not up to the task of tackling the climate and environmental crisis, because it reflects a worldview



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## JUSTICE POUR LA PLANÈTE TERRE

Un système juridique protégeant le vivant des méfaits du tout à la propriété privée serait un puissant outil de transition écologique.

in which nature is “managed” based on our needs. The legal revolution I propose turns this on its head, no longer talking about the environment, but about Earth’s ecosystem. It is about re-integrating humans into nature and redefining our rules for living together to include non-humans, who today are not subjects in law but objects to be appropriated and exploited. Very concretely, this involves placing certain limits on the freedom to do business and, above all, on private property rights. It means calling into question the fundamental principles on which our societies are built, as we face up to the challenges of maintaining life on Earth.

Given the urgency of the matter, it is time for radical ideas. The scenarios fuelling today’s public debate are forcing all political parties to take a position on a potential legal reform that will threaten the entire financial and industrial system. One such idea is the “Parliament of Things” proposed by French philosopher Bruno Latour,<sup>1</sup> which could be an educational phase in a process of more radical legal transformation, starting with the creation of a “Chamber

of the Future”, as suggested by Dominique Bourg.<sup>2</sup>

Such ideas, which once seemed impossible, utopian, romantic even, are beginning to be adopted by very different politicians. This language (which remains just that until it is voted on and implemented) is echoed by French President Emmanuel Macron in his proposal to internationally recognise ecocide as a crime. Of course, he knows very well that at the United Nations, countries like the US and China will never allow an international convention on ecocide to be signed. Macron is happy to endorse innovative ideas as long as they are not binding on France or Europe. His Renew Europe group in the European Parliament recently voted in favour of an amendment which would see Europe’s recommendations for COP15 (the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Kunming, China, in October 2020) include recognition of a legal status for natural commons. But this begs the question: if the vote had been on a European directive on the rights of nature, would they have voted in

favour of this legal paradigm shift with the same conviction and consistency?

Today, the commitments made by states are far too unambitious and, crucially, not enshrined in law as obligations: they are simply promises, and often empty ones at that. As products – and, therefore, guardians – of this system, politicians are unable to escape from these power dynamics and focus on genuinely protecting the public interest in the long term. Truly questioning the economic system and the dogma of growth means challenging the dominant representation of the world and society – and revolutionising how we meet our needs. Which is why we need a new legal system: the United Nations has spent the past ten years discussing a universal declaration on the rights of nature, and the past five a binding treaty on transnational corporations, human rights, and the environment. At the European level, there should, at the very least, be a directive on companies’ duty of care, with criminal sanctions. More concretely, we should grant legal personhood to species and ecosystems, and

1 Bruno Latour proposed the concept of the “Parliament of Things”, notably in his 1991 work *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* (Paris: La Découverte), pointing to a new relationship of reconciliation between humanity and nature, effectively putting an end to humanism which was, in his view, responsible for the divorce between the two in the first place.

2 The idea of a Chamber of the Future proposes the establishment of a third chamber made up of a mixture of experts and citizens drawn by lot. This chamber would intercede in the legislative process in the long term interest. Dominique Bourg et al. (2011). *Pour une 6<sup>e</sup> République écologique*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob.

use that as a basis for a legal status for natural commons. Then, through the creation of a European Public Prosecutor for the Environment, or even for the Rights of Nature, the tools would be there to shift our legal system away from one in which private property rules, and towards one where conservation of the living world takes priority.

Lastly, the concept of ecocide allows us to lay the blame at the door of executives and the biggest polluters, and to stop constantly guilt-tripping citizens into action. This is crucial, because it would flip the burden of responsibility on its head. Over the last couple of years, protest movements have been sparked across the world by rising energy and food prices: from Ecuador to Chile, from France to Iran. On the one hand, there are “climate marches”, demonstrations by (mostly young) people who demand that we finally take the climate seriously, and that we begin the energy transition, by force if necessary. On the other, we are seeing the suffering and despair of those who bear the brunt of social and environmental inequality daily, and who are hit hardest by rising oil prices. We are witnessing the emergence of social revolts whose only aim is to express rage at this corrupt political class – with its cosy relationship with finance and industry – and determination not to be the forgotten victims of the system. But it’s hard to

make out an alternative project behind the anger – other than a demand for greater democracy.

## MOBILISING FOR JUSTICE

That is why Notre Affaire à Tous – a non-profit organisation founded in France in 2015 – is trying to promote a meeting of minds by inviting the *gilets jaunes* to join the climate march movement. The organisation also runs the Super Local project, which asks citizens to document climate change, biodiversity loss, and the activities contributing to them where they live. It is about engaging citizens by mapping the consequences of the climate crisis. The aim is to create a vision of environmentalism as a shared social project for tackling social and economic problems.

The key to the significance of the *Affaire du Siècle* petition was that it supported tangible action – namely, a lawsuit.<sup>3</sup> This project, inspired by a similar lawsuit filed in the Netherlands by Urgenda,<sup>4</sup> was launched by Notre Affaire à Tous with the aim to show, in an informative way, that the state is not honouring its commitments. We have lodged a formal complaint, and hope that it will be upheld by the court. It all began back in 2013 with the launch of a European Citizens’ Initiative on the crime of ecocide, which was supported by parties from across the continent. This breeding ground for activism spawned organisations like Notre Affaire à Tous,

Nature Rights, and Wild Legal in France, and many others elsewhere in Europe.

The work of Notre Affaire à Tous goes on. We have created a European network for the rights of nature, which is part of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. We have drafted laws on the crime of ecocide in France, and on the rights of nature in Sweden. And we have been involved in an international campaign for the recognition of ecocide by the International Criminal Court. Each member acts individually or collaboratively with the support of citizens and political actors, both in their own country and internationally, by proposing a reform of environmental and criminal law. It is a three-pronged approach that consists of mobilising citizens, using the legal system to highlight institutional failings, and putting forward proposals at an institutional level. We are constantly working at the level of both institutions and citizens.

Notre Affaire à Tous is trying to find innovative ways of moving the democratic debate forward, and of presenting an ecosystemic vision, by seizing opportunities as they arise, ensuring that this subject continues to be talked about and is visible in the media, and that citizens become increasingly engaged. As the environmentalist slogan goes: “We are not defending nature – we are nature defending itself.” Through the law. ■

<sup>3</sup> The *Affaire du Siècle* (the Case of the Century) petition was launched in December 2018 and collected more than 2 million signatures in less than a month.

<sup>4</sup> The Urgenda Foundation took the Dutch government to court on behalf of 886 Dutch citizens to force it to take more action against climate change. In 2015, a court in the Hague ruled that the Dutch state had a legal duty to take more urgent measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a decision which was upheld by the Dutch Supreme Court in December 2019.



# THE MELODRAMA OF CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**CARA DAGGETT**

The far right likes to position itself as the ultimate good, a hero standing up to an evil world. Melodrama is its genre of choice, through which it tells of its fights with environmentalists, feminists, and minorities. Political scientist Cara Daggett explains how this thinking shapes right-wing politics in the US, what environmentalists can do to tackle it, and why the importance of storytelling must not be underestimated in the green transition.

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**GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:** In the past you've spoken about how the main genre of climate change denialism is melodrama. Can you explain?

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**CARA DAGGETT:** I have been studying the new kinds of stories that the far right is telling about climate change, and how these are shifting as people start to experience increasingly intense planetary changes. I am specifically interested in the relationship between misogyny, fossil fuel support, and climate denial on the far right. These elements are often analysed separately – for instance, the #MeToo movement on one hand, and environmental destruction on the other. Instead, I have proposed the concept of “petro-masculinity” to think about how this group of problems are related, how gender anxiety slithers alongside climate anxiety.

I use genre to help explain this relationship. I am interested in genre, or storytelling more generally, because social genres help people organise their experiences and turn them into shared meanings. Genres can produce a sense of community. They tell people what to pay attention to, what is connected to history as part of a pattern, and what to expect in the future. Especially when living through crisis moments, you can see how genre-making can be important politically.

Melodrama, for a long time a powerful political genre in the US, appears to be a key genre for the American far right. I came to appreciate its role in US politics through Elisabeth Anker's book *Orgies of Feeling*, where she shows the dominance of melodrama after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Melodrama is a highly dramatic and emotive form that constructs polar opposites of good and evil – like the “Axis of Evil” after 9/11.<sup>1</sup> Melodrama idealises the morality of the audience. Unlike tragedy, it does not ask for self-reflection. The heroes are purely good, and villainy and evil are “outside” the community. It is not surprising then that melodrama is often co-opted by authoritarian movements, although you can find it in democratic publics too.

**You have mentioned that this genre can reflect on a wide range of topics. Can you tell us about this intersectional component of melodrama?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** Another influence for me came from Sylvia Wynter's work on how the human is also a genre.<sup>2</sup> For Wynter, genre is a way to theorise this kind of intersectionality where race, gender, class, and sexuality could all be seen as criteria that determine who is to be counted as fully human, and who is to be excluded. Wynter maps out these stories

across Western imperial history as “genres of Man”, and they tell us what counts as human achievement, as being worthy of membership in the community. We still see these stories circulating today in the celebration of figures like the breadwinners, the investors, the entrepreneurs, or, in the categories of a popular phrase in the American right, “the makers versus the takers”. From this perspective, the resurgence of the far right today is only the latest instance of movements across Western history that have been hell-bent on defending the genre of Man, on maintaining all the exclusions that privilege white men and Western capitalism.

Intersectionality also helps us understand a key tactic that has been used to defend the genre of Man: divide your opponents, ensure that they remain fragmented. Wynter shows how those exclusions are interconnected from the start, meaning that they also need to be dismantled together if new genres are to emerge.

Today, environmental justice movements worldwide (like the Sunrise Movement in the US) are insisting on the intersection of these different kinds of violence and are putting them on the agenda together. They show how environmental violence depends on social injustice, which is why people of colour and

1 The term “Axis of Evil” was first used by US President George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address and was repeated throughout his presidency to identify foreign governments such as those in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as common enemies of the US, and to rally public opinion behind the War on Terror.

2 Sylvia Wynter is a Jamaican writer and cultural theorist who is best known for her writings on the theories of history, literature, science, and Black studies.



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poor communities suffer the most from climate change. We should never forget how important it is to build alliances across social justice movements, not just because it amplifies our voices, but also because these different kinds of violence are best addressed systemically.

**What exactly is the meaning of climate denial in the genre you outlined?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** What I see in the far right is not always denial. In a 2018 paper I called it climate refusal,<sup>3</sup> but perhaps climate defiance would be a better term. An attachment to the righteousness of fossil fuel lifestyles seems to bring about a desire to not just deny, but to defy climate change. Defying climate change is different from ignoring or downplaying it, which is what many people do who otherwise acknowledge its reality, myself included.

Climate defiance occurs when people understand the threat but refuse to change, doubling down on the violence. This is partly a way to defend elite interests and profit, but it's also a psychological defence mechanism, a way to manage threats to powerful identities and to channel feelings of impotence onto more vulnerable bodies.

Ignoring climate change is dangerous but it is a passive disposition, often connected to emotions of confusion or fear. Defiance on the far right is active and angry. Defiance can no longer rest at defending the status quo but must accelerate fossil fuel use until the last moment. And this may often require authoritarian politics.

This speaks to the more general pleasure taken in the fossil authoritarianism of America – it feels good because it bursts the constraints of liberal, Western hypocrisy. Using fossil fuels can feel like a moment of agency, of control, in a world that feels increasingly out of control.

3 Cara Daggett (2018). "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire." *Millennium*, 47(1), pp. 25–44.

**You said that climate refusal is more of an issue than denial. Have the deniers become completely marginal?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** I do not think denial is marginal. Many people in power still regularly circulate denialist narratives. Just think of Scott Pruitt, head of the US Environmental Protection Agency. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly untenable to deny that the climate is changing.

Denial coexists with a host of other responses on the Right, many of which contradict each other. A conservative politician or fossil fuel executive might say something that acknowledges climate change, and then enact policy or make another statement that promotes business as usual. But denial is still useful at moments, especially if it brings shock value and public attention. This makes sense in a US administration that has embraced the reality TV aspects of politics.

The complexity of climate narratives on the Right, and the cognitive dissonance they require, are important to study because they challenge the usual assumptions made about climate science communication. Many researchers have faith that once people truly understand the problem and its urgency, once they are shown how denial was manufactured by fossil fuel interests, then they will support a politics of mitigation. I don't think this faith is entirely

misplaced, otherwise I would not be teaching in higher education. But this doesn't reflect very well what we see on the far right, where it seems that recognising climate change only fuels a violent and ethno-nationalist reaction.

**The only effective way to mitigate climate change is through joint international efforts, but far-right forces are mostly unwilling to cooperate with other nations. Is this one of the reasons why they decided to defend fossil consumption?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** Yes, that is true. A lot of the rhetoric around climate defiance is based on the acknowledgment that climate change requires global coordination and cooperation, which the Right dismisses as "globalism", a term loaded with anti-Semitic connotations. Indeed, climate change is a hard problem for the American right because addressing it would require a politics counter to the interests of big donors like the Koch brothers, whose money is sunk in a fossil fuel future. It also requires an investment in a global political system that is at odds with ethno-nationalism and white supremacy. So, climate change provokes anxiety about both fossil-fuelled capitalism and about the particular conception of American sovereignty that drives them. This conception of American sovereignty is based on the belief that the US can and should have complete control over cross-border flows, and even over transnational flows abroad. That fantasy is

increasingly untenable in a globalised world for many reasons, not just climate change.

**If neoconservatives had reflected on the gravity of climate change, they could have advocated imposing some form of American climate leadership on the rest of the world, the same way the Bush government aimed to export democracy in the 2000s. Is this kind of thinking absent from mainstream American conservatism?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** Some ecomodernists are certainly trying to drum up support by arguing that America needs to become a global leader in green technology and innovation. But by and large the American right sees any form of environmental policy leadership as an infringement on US power, and particularly US corporate power, given that they have successfully overturned many important environmental regulations domestically.

I'll add that climate change forces the US to reckon with its historical accountability. The Right understands the US as a beacon of good in the world, but taking climate change seriously requires understanding how America has contributed significantly to the problem, historically and today, while simultaneously extracting wealth from elsewhere. Therefore, this kind of globalism requires more than just a set of new policies. It has to come with taking responsibility for a history in which the US was

not always on the good side, something which would mean practising humility. Because how could those who caused the problem expect to have the best ideas for solving it? This is not to say that the US has no role to play in innovation, but rather that it should recognise that historical culpability probably produces blind spots – like the national faith in capitalism – in terms of thinking creatively about building a more sustainable future.

**Another challenge would be for people to give up their comfortable ways of life. Does that play a role in the genre?**

**CARA DAGGETT:** Yes, absolutely. But in terms of building political alliances, we may want to differentiate between agents and their degree of responsibility in climate change. There are, on the one hand, those who are knowingly pushing denial and defiance, and are profiting monumentally – a relatively small group of people and corporations that participate in fossil fuel boosterism, many of whom we can name. Then there are many others, including me and you, who participate with our daily activities, especially in Europe and North America where per capita consumption is so much higher than in the Global South. That is responsibility too, but addressing these different kinds of complicity brings different political problems and it is important not to collapse them. Focusing too much on consumerism as a cultural practice can distract

THE AMERICAN  
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ON US POWER

us from that narrow focus on corporate and elite power which is such an important fulcrum for change.

This often brings me to Gramsci and his thoughts on hegemonic ideologies that make people complicit in a system that is hurting them.<sup>4</sup> Being able to consume like Americans – cheap, mass products, delivered to your door by Amazon – provides many comforts and pleasures that cushion people from an otherwise cruel and unjust system. This is why environmental movements should be careful to not talk about consumption without also talking about social and economic justice. More than that, though, they need to talk about different practices of pleasure – all the things that people stand to gain from transformed political and economic systems that are fairer and more sustainable. From life expectancy to suicide and depression rates in the US, there is plenty of evidence that many people are hurting in the current system and stand to gain a lot from system transformation.

### Can you give us an example of a good, progressive counter-narrative?

**CARA DAGGETT:** In Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism*, she reflects on the experience of living through moments of disruption, when our old social and political genres that make sense of life are broken, but we are nevertheless still attached to them. We do not have new genres yet to describe the emerging reality, and the old genres give us a sense of unfounded security (cruel optimism). For example, the American "good life" genre is anchored upon consumption and middle-class status symbols like home ownership, a car, a career that pays a living wage – all of which are increasingly out of reach for most Americans (while for others, they were never really possible). These old genres break many of their promises, like the narrative that if you work hard you will get a job and achieve the dream of security.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian Communist politician and philosopher. His concept of hegemony refers to the process through which the bourgeoisie uses its moral and intellectual ability to subordinate the working classes by making them subconsciously consent to a system of values that do not benefit them.

Berlant highlights the need for a proliferation of new genres, but also emphasises how difficult that is to achieve. A genre has to provide people with a sense of love and connection to a place and a community.

The current youth climate movements on the rise worldwide are providing us with visions of a green transition that give me more hope than I have had since I began studying this topic. The kinds of stories that young people are telling are different from the horror and dystopia that dominated how we talked about climate change five or ten years ago.

### How can progressives use Gramsci's concept of hegemony?

**CARA DAGGETT:** Many progressives are attentive to Gramsci and the importance of addressing hegemonic ideology as part of systemic change. I'm interested in what this says about the role of art and aesthetics – something fascist movements usually excel at, and which will need to be countered. For instance, during the first New Deal in the US of the 1930s, art was understood to play an important role in communicating the new economic model to the public. The government hired artists, photographers, graphic artists, and writers to engage with the public and to depict New Deal imaginaries, just as they hired engineers or economists. I saw a similar attention to aesthetics in a

video made with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to promote the Green New Deal, in which she teamed up with video and graphic designers to imagine the story of a little girl who grows up in a world in which the Green New Deal has been enacted. It was, in fact, creating an alternative genre of future American well-being. That's just a small example, but it is important not to underestimate the significance of aesthetics and art because pleasure has to be part of the story. We need new genres that reconceptualise pleasure as something different from consumerism. These may be built upon the pleasures we have lost in today's economic system: time, community, leisure – and not leisure activities premised upon retail.



**CARA DAGGETT**

is assistant professor at Virginia Tech. Her book *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work* (2019, Duke University Press), traces the entangled politics of work and energy following the discovery of energy in the 19th century. She is also interested in the politics of gender and energy.



# Threads of Political Ecology: A Review

Today we find ourselves in a historical moment in which green ideas have gained, in many parts of the world, unprecedented levels of engagement. As older-rooted traditions continue to see growth and renewal, fresh patterns of ecological thought sprout and branch off the existing. The result: an incredibly diverse, rich, and experimental body of thought crisscrossing borders both geographic and disciplinary to call for change in the face of ecological breakdown.

From deep ecology to ecomodernism, and from ecofeminism to collapsology, the many streams of political ecology form a living, evolving whole that is complex and, at times, contradictory. With this in mind, the *Green European Journal* has put together a selection mapping some of the major currents that have shaped political ecology in recent years and which continue to do so. Traversing fiction through academia, we explore why the following six contributions have been indispensable to the vast field of green thinking.

## THE OVERSTORY

**RICHARD POWERS**

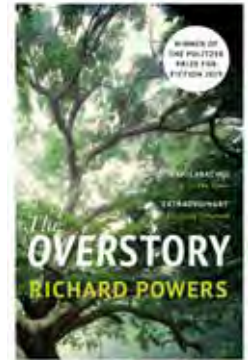
(2018, W. W. Norton & Company)

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A REVIEW BY  
EDOUARD GAUDOT

What does a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction have to do with political ecology? Well, 2019 prize winner *The Overstory* is not just the beautiful and breathtaking tale of a cluster of individuals connected to, and by, their love of trees in various forms. From roots to seeds, Powers' novel unfolds in the pattern of a tree, like the giant Californian redwoods that are central characters in this story of growing awareness about the living and the need to protect them against profit-driven industrial aggression, or sheer administrative carelessness. From hard branches to soft leaves, it intertwines nine human destinies and leads them to discover, celebrate, and defend the forest as the great rhizome of life that connects us all.

Throughout the 1970s' first environmentalist movements, the tree sitting of the 1990s, the anti-globalisation Seattle protests of 1999, and the post 9/11 crackdown on activism, individuals may have felt lost when faced with the harsh reality woven by the callous threads of power, money, and society. The desire to conform is often the most powerful incentive to let things happen, and even contribute to their happening. Tragic and beautiful, epic and grotesque, the destinies of *The Overstory* offer a deep meditation on the irreparable psychic damage that manifests in our unmitigated separation from nature. But from the individual sense of purpose to the collective action it triggers, *The Overstory* also offers a much-needed narrative of a change of scale in terms of comradeship and collective action the world over.



► Fiction is not only a powerful tool for giving life to our desires, imagination, and aspirations. It is also a source of knowledge. It showcases and experiments on the world and humans. An important trend in the literature of recent years has been the germination of ecosystemic and ecological thinking – something which allows for the telling of different kinds of stories than the tales rooted in drama and melodrama that abounded in the 20th century.

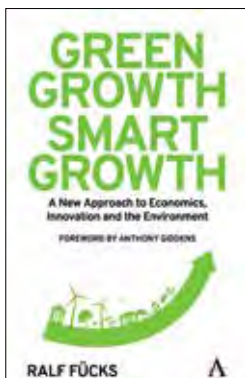
Whether utopian, dystopian, or neutral, fiction represents a great portal to the worlds of political ecology. While Powers' most recent book stands out as a more classical work of literature, it is part of a distinctive literary movement which counts among it the likes of Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, Ursula K. Le Guin, Barbara Kingsolver, Amitav Ghosh, and Kim Stanley Robinson. In good company, Richard Powers' powerful eco-novel can take its place on the shelves of our political travel guides to the journey towards a better world. ■

## GREEN GROWTH, SMART GROWTH: A New Approach to Economics, Innovation and the Environment

**RALF FÜCKS**

(2015, Anthem Press)

A REVIEW BY RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ



German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk once wrote that continuing business-as-usual is criminal, but that an ethic of renunciation and self-denial is naïve; the intelligent approach would lie somewhere between. This quote is the guiding principle in Ralf Fücks' *Green Growth, Smart Growth*.

In the debate on the right strategy against climate change – degrowth or sustainable growth – Fücks is a staunch advocate of the latter. We do not need appeals to extreme frugality or zero growth. What is needed, Fücks argues, is technological, political, and social innovation and progress that allows us to enter a new stage of industrial modernity: “a shift from a fossil-based to a post-fossil economy, from the ruthless exploitation of nature toward growth in tandem with it, decoupling economic growth from environmental consumption.”

The first half of the book's 390 pages is dedicated to the environmental crisis. Fücks outlines the economic rise of developing countries, the emergence of a new global middle class, the demographic development, the shift in globalisation, and the stress all of these factors put on nature. He explains how civilisation depends on three elements: a stable climate, fertile arable land, and intact water cycles. Today, all three are in a critical state. The second half outlines a green industrial revolution as an answer to the environmental crises. He highlights how a green transformation can take place in different economic areas, ranging from agriculture and energy to city planning and financial markets. In some ways, it is a manual for an ecological transition.

Still, a number of issues are inadequately addressed. The rebound effect, the phenomenon by which efficiency gains from new technologies are lost through behavioural or systemic responses, only finds mention on a few pages. The important role that individual action can play in fighting climate change is also under-illustrated. There is a difference between forcing behavioural changes on the individual level and enticing behavioural changes ►



► by integrating sustainability into culture, making it something “cool” or simply nudging people in the right direction.

Originally published in German in 2013 when Fücks was co-president of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, this book gave added momentum to the Green New Deal in the German media and strongly pushed back against the anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideas of the degrowth movement, which have a particularly strong following in Germany. With this book, Fücks has become one of the leading voices of green capitalism. ■

## DOWN TO EARTH: Politics in the New Climatic Regime

**BRUNO LATOUR**

(2018, Polity)

A REVIEW

BY EDOUARD GAUDOT



A thinker of the climate imperative, Bruno Latour is one of the most influential minds in the Western intellectual landscape. In response to the Trump phenomenon, his reflections centre on the idea that the climate issue, and its denial, must become the pivotal point of our political orientation.

Between a progressive modernity with its face turned towards the global – the engine of globalisation and the cultural domination of the liberal elites – and its rejection in the name of the local, neither side of the divide is able to account for the reality of today's world. In a word, the trajectory of globalisation is as ungrounded as the denial of the human origins of the degradation of life on the planet.

However, the critical rejection of globalisation carries with it two contradictions. First, the temptation to return to the absolutist framework of the nation state is accompanied everywhere by a lurch towards identity, nativism, and xenophobia. Second, forsaking any planetary dimension condemns the boldest policies to insignificance.

The credibility and effectiveness of political action rely above all on its ability to “describe the real”. Namely, in this case, the “new climate regime”, the explosion of inequalities, and generalised migration. But trapped in the categories that founded their power, the elites gave up taking this reality seriously, preferring a kind of secession to live off-shore in climate denial – either tacit, or open as flaunted by the American presidency.

To embrace a common horizon, to “orient oneself”, there is the need for a new compass capable of leading us away from the politics of Trump. It is necessary to oppose this combination of the worst of globalisation and the worst of nativism with a combination of their best: acknowledging our roots in the earth as well as the interdependence that this imposes, in order to redefine together the stakes of geosocial struggle.

As the book's French title, *Où atterrir ?* asks: “Where should we land?” The conclusion may surprise many, given the current limits of the EU, but it is in Europe that Latour proposes to touch ground. Because if there is indeed a laboratory for the redefinition of our political priorities outside the historic framework of the nation state, and in the service of a planetary dimension, it is indeed the old continent. Let us hope that its inhabitants are sufficiently aware of this to prove him right. ■

# ON FIRE: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal

**NAOMI KLEIN**

(2019, Simon & Schuster)

A REVIEW BY ANNABELLE DAWSON

In Naomi Klein's latest book, her career-long critique of corporate globalisation and capitalism gears up to advocate for a Green New Deal. Fortified with new material, Klein's chosen evidence traverses excerpts from her prolific work over the past decade, from reflections on a potentially radical Vatican to dispatches from a smoke-choked British Columbia. Set against a backdrop of stubborn political inaction on climate, spiralling inequalities, and an increasingly assertive far right, hope grows in parallel with urgency as a plan for change emerges in the nick of time.

In November 2018, activists from the Sunrise movement gathered in Washington to call for a Green New Deal. Their friendly reception among young progressive democrats – a “new political breed” – was followed just three months later by the launch of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey's formal resolution on a Green New Deal. Published in September 2019, the timing of Klein's latest release ahead of the 2020 US presidential race is unmistakable.

*On Fire* is not a roadmap for a Green New Deal and does not seek to flesh out its more practical aspects as others have done (see Ann Pettifor or Jeremy Rifkin). Rather, it makes the overarching case for how rapid decarbonisation represents a “once-in-a-century chance” to fix our deeply flawed economic model, and why a Green New Deal is our best shot at doing so. Essentially, this involves profound civilisational transformation to reconfigure society and put forth an alternative worldview embedded in interdependence, reciprocity, and cooperation. Way more than solar panels and wind turbines, the Green New Deal is about structural change simultaneously targeting the multiple interlocking crises of our times: ecological, socio-economic, and democratic.

This kind of change requires a deeply intersectional approach. For Klein, the power of the Green New Deal lies in its ability to “raise an army of supporters” by weaving together into one unshakable climate coalition the threads of various movements: environmental, workers', anti-racist, feminist, democratic, indigenous, and many more.

The Green New Deal faces a perilous road ahead. Klein's latest book serves as a pressing reminder that any plan for ecological transition must keep climate justice at its core if it is to stand a fighting chance of tackling the crises we face. At a time when “climate barbarism” looms, there is much at stake. ■



## ECOFEMINISM

**MARIA MIES &  
VANDANA SHIVA**

(2014, Zed Books, 2nd edition)

A REVIEW BY CYRIELLE CHATELAIN

The word “ecofeminism” was coined in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death). She believed that the feminist and environmental movements should converge, and introduced the idea that the subjugation of women and their bodies is the product of the same capitalist and patriarchal system that exploits nature. In a work first published in 1993, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva pursue the thinking of the 1970s on the need to create a new worldview that fully recognises the interdependence of every living thing, and to question a system that feeds on the colonisation of living things and the earth.

Maria Mies is a German sociologist; Vandana Shiva is an Indian physicist, activist, and writer. Shiva is known for her activism in support of small farmers and against GMOs and the patenting of living organisms, and was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize in 1993. Their work fuses the perspectives of feminist activists who have studied and fought the capitalist system from different positions – the heart of the West for one, the exploited Global South for the other. Through a critical analysis of the patriarchal and neocolonial capitalist system, Shiva and Mies seek to highlight and deconstruct three closely linked processes of domination: the colonisation of the South by the North, the domination of women by men, and the exploitation and destruction of nature by humans.

These three processes follow the same logic: a devaluation of what is considered natural and a naturalisation of what is “other” than the Western white man; a negation of domestic or subsistence labour; the colonisation of land and bodies by Westerners, presented as a phase of development; and the delegitimisation of any claim to customary rights or alternative ways of life. These essays illuminate urgent issues such as environmental justice, the distribution of natural resources, and the unsustainable nature of Western consumption. Mies and Shiva have contributed to today’s revival of ecofeminism and to the development of a decolonial feminist thinking – in the academic, activist, and political spheres – which continues to seek paths towards emancipation from a predatory and deadly system. ■



The work of the Swedish historian and philosopher Andreas Malm over the past 10 years helps us cut through some of the complexity surrounding the energy crisis. Malm's approach is an activist one, rooted in historical materialism and the study of societal power relationships, all based on solid empirical research.

In response to the global ecological crisis, thinkers influenced by climate science and chemistry have proposed calling today's epoch – in which humanity becomes a geological force in its own right – the "Anthropocene". Malm is a major figure in contemporary ecological Marxism, which considers that the accumulation of capital leads to the destruction of living processes. His proposal is to replace the concept of the Anthropocene with that of the "Capitalocene", a term all the more enlightening when considering the historical trajectory of "fossil capital".

Malm's thinking on the origins of fossil capital began with an ambitious work analysing the history of an iconic machine, the steam engine. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (2016, Verso) reinterprets the story of steam technology through the prism of the social and political relationships which the new technology engendered. According to Malm, fossil fuels are a "microcosm of unequal social relationships". For instance, the cotton industry's switch to coal in the 1830s was primarily due to social factors. Whereas the management of water resources had been characterised by collective discipline, the steam engine offered a flexible and individualistic source of energy that fitted well with the ideology of English textile capitalism in the 1830s. Malm goes further, looking at the "fossil empire" and how Britain used steamboats and railways to subjugate the peripheries of the 19th-century world economy – places like India, Egypt, and western Africa, all at the forefront of today's climate risks.

In his more recent *The Progress of this Storm* (published 2017), Malm proposes a new "epistemology of climate realism". The thread of political theory running through Malm's work consists of reimagining nature in order to work with it. In his view, nature is neither a part of the world free from human intervention nor a hybrid artefact built by humans; it is what resists, what underpins our condition. Malm ultimately shows how the global ecological crisis is the result of contingent historical choices and the outcome of an increasingly unequal and destructive global capitalism. This historical, theoretical, and militant work is an important contribution to the growing discipline of social ecology. ■

## FOSSIL CAPITAL: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming

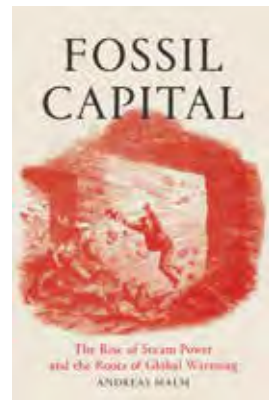
**ANDREAS MALM**

(2016, Verso)

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A REVIEW BY FRANÇOIS JARRIGE

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Paris: La Découverte / Mediapart.



# EMANCIPATION IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

## RETHINKING TRANSITION WITH KARL POLANYI

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ARTICLE BY  
**DIRK HOLEMANS**

The economic historian Karl Polanyi charted the development of market society. Moving beyond a simple opposition between the state and the market, his seminal *The Great Transformation* explained how a centuries-long dialectical relationship between the two shaped modern Western Europe. Today, transition and transformation are again the order of the day. After 40 years of neoliberalism tearing at the social fabric, what form will the 21st-century counter-movement take?

**N**ot so long ago, every organisation wanted to be sustainable. Introduced as a central concept by the Brundtland Report in 1987, “sustainability” became a guiding principle for governments, companies, and NGOs.<sup>1</sup> 50 shades of green emerged under its conceptual umbrella, ranging from real institutional change to businesses looking to give their activities an eco-sheen. Although the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals remain a significant process, today “transition” and “transformation” have joined sustainable development as leading concepts. Unions call for a just transition away from the carbon economy, while think tanks set out visions for transformation.

The rise of these twin concepts reflects the growing recognition that societies face multiple crises requiring profound changes by way of response. As ever, new concepts risk acting as buzzwords, proposing bright futures but underestimating the complexity that real transformation entails. Worse, they risk fulfilling the maxim that holds that “everything

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<sup>1</sup> The Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future”, was released by the United Nations-mandated World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

must change so that everything can stay the same.” An energy transition initiative may produce efficiency gains and, as a result, cars may use less fuel. But, without tax changes, the improvements will just prompt people to drive more. To return to the earlier concept, a transition need not always be sustainable.

## THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

Authors writing on transformation often mention the Austrian anthropologist Karl Polanyi, but usually only pay lip service to his seminal 1944 work, *The Great Transformation*.<sup>2</sup> This is a pity, as Polanyi’s framework allows for a clear understanding of the neoliberal era. Polanyi asked why the 20th century was a period of world wars, economic depression, and fascism. He found his answer in the development of laissez-faire market liberalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Its key tenet – that society must bend to the will of self-regulating markets – disembeds the economy from society, both producing disruption and provoking counter-movements calling for social protection. This “double movement” of greater marketisation and a corresponding push for protection creates two forms of counter-movement: the authoritarian and the democratic. Both promise social protection while respectively depriving or enabling freedom. Just as in

18th-and 19th-century England, today’s neo-liberal disembedding of the economy disrupts societies and ecosystems alike, inducing spontaneous reactions from people in defence of their lifeworlds. Today, democratic counter-movements are emerging – think of the climate youth – and authoritarian counter-movements find their expression in figures such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán.

Self-regulating markets disrupt societies because they are based on the “fictitious commodification” of nature, labour, and money. These goods are not meant only to be bought and sold but to perform multiple non-economic functions, and fictitiously treating them as mere commodities has severe negative consequences. In the early Industrial Revolution, children were reduced to cheap labour for the sake of profit. Forests, despite the importance of the complex ecosystems they host, are considered simply as stocks of wood by the governments today ruling Brazil and Romania. The welfare state, the result of the 20th-century democratic counter-movements, partially overturned labour’s position as a mere commodity by introducing workers’ protections and universal public services. But in recent decades these advances have come under attack from neoliberal commodification. Four decades ago, access to higher education was almost

2 Karl Polanyi (1944, 2001). *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economical Origins of our Times*. Boston: Beacon Press.

free because the university was seen as an emancipatory institution. Now, young people are forced into debt to attend.

Polanyi explained the concept of disembedding by introducing the tension between “Habitation versus Improvement”. As England industrialised, entrepreneurs strove to increase profits through efficient production. For this to be achieved, people were displaced and moved closer to factories in towns and cities. Their habitation was sacrificed for the sake of improvement. The contemporary parallels are striking. While the post-war welfare state strove for development across the country and sought to provide jobs and public services to people wherever they lived, today this is no longer the case. With the advance of the globalised neoliberal economy, factories moved to Asia and millions of good jobs were lost. Large cities found new roles as metropolitan nodes in global networks with London as a financial centre, as a prime example. Former industrial regions not only lost factories but, as governments gave up on geographic equality and the neoliberal drive for efficiency spread, lifeworld-supporting networks of public transport, local shops, schools, bank branches, and union offices gradually eroded. Regional railway lines were closed as fast lines were built connecting big cities. In the new logic of territorial competitiveness, regions compete for private external investment and peripheries are at a clear disadvantage.

The dominant logic of commodification increasingly colonises new aspects of life. In 2005, Nestlé’s chief executive declared that water as a human right is an extreme idea. In Chile, against a backdrop of severe social unrest, the government is continuing its practice of auctioning off rivers to (international) private companies for commercial hydropower, often with profound socio-environmental impacts such as the displacement of local communities and water pollution. The neoliberal logic transforms regions into commodities on display for purchase by global financial markets. The destruction of places and means of “habitation” underlies the resentment felt by the *gilets jaunes* towards the establishment in Paris, as well as the 2019 defeat of the British Labour movement in its former industrial strongholds.

This rejection of ever-greater commodification implies that a crucial part of democratic counter-movements, and therefore of transformative green politics, has to be decommodification. Goods and services need not be managed solely according to market principles but can be organised based on principles of redistribution and reciprocity. This can be done by restoring public services (cities taking back control of energy systems, for example) or enabling citizens’ collectives run as commons (energy cooperatives or community-supported agriculture).

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ALIKE

## TRIPLE MOVEMENT

Polanyi's framework is not without its shortcomings. Two critiques are relevant to consider. First, sociologist Nancy Fraser points out that social protection can also entail forms of oppression.<sup>3</sup> The post-war welfare state was based on the breadwinner model, on women staying at home. In this respect, the expansion of the labour market has allowed women to evade patriarchal dominance. Not every market need be evil; the problem is when the market sets social relations and not the other way around. Fraser concludes that a triple movement, adding emancipation to the market and social protection, would improve on Polanyi's double movement. The second criticism concerns the role of the state. Polanyi was naïve regarding the protective state. In reality, states can act as guardians of the neoliberal market economy and can introduce authoritarian governance, standing in the way of both protection and emancipation. At the same time, Polanyi recognised that the state was not the only source of social protection. Counter-movements followed multiple paths, including the development of forms of social protection without direct state intervention through associations and workers' cooperatives.

With these critiques incorporated into the analysis, the challenges faced by contemporary societies are clear. Four decades of neoliberal disembedding of the economy has devastated the social fabric. The counter-movement for social protection is here in both its authoritarian and democratic incarnations. The democratic counter-movement needs to be emancipatory as well as protective, a dual task in which the role of the state is ambivalent. This triple movement occurs as the activities of humankind exceed planetary boundaries and authoritarian leaders ignore climate disruption to support fossil industries. The paradox is that they promise social protection (that does not materialise) while deepening ecological insecurity. Faced with this rival counter-movement, democratic strategies for socio-ecological

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Fraser (2017). *Why Two Karls are Better than One: Integrating Polanyi and Marx in a Critical Theory of the Current Crisis*. Working Paper der DFG-Kollegforscher\_innengruppe Postwachstumsgesellschaften. 1/2017. Jena.



transformation will have to offer a more attractive narrative than the authoritarians.

The extent of the challenge becomes greater than commonly assumed when the unequal effects of transition are factored in. Disadvantaged groups often suffer from ecological problems and mainstream ecopolitics twice over, a “double inequality”. As the European Environmental Agency has found, people that are unemployed or on low incomes tend to be more negatively affected by environmental health hazards.<sup>4</sup> This is both because they are more likely to have greater exposure to pollution but also because their housing conditions tend to be of lower quality and they depend more on increasingly scarce public services. Global warming only worsens matters. Hot summers hit people on low incomes in unventilated apartments hardest. People on low incomes have smaller ecological footprints but suffer the most from carbon taxes, as poorly insulated homes require more fuel for heating and alternatives to old cars are not always accessible. Viewed from this perspective, the attraction of the authoritarian counter-movement is more understandable.

Taking these points together, a transformative vision must span the socio-ecological re-embedding of the economy, decommodification,

the democratisation of institutions, and eliminating inequality to offer a good life for all. The focus should be on emancipatory forms of social protection and emancipatory movements for new forms of social protection. Redistributive social protection remains a core responsibility of governments, but citizens, self-organising based on reciprocity and trust, have a part to play too. Commons initiatives such as community land trusts are prefigurative movements, collectively imagining a future society through their ongoing practices, social relationships, and rules.

## PREFIGURING THE TRANSFORMATION

The self-organisation of citizens has been at the core of political ecology since its inception through the concept of “autonomy”. Developed by thinkers such as the French philosopher André Gorz, autonomy means people taking back control over their lives. Autonomy stands in contrast to heteronomy, in which free markets or paternalistic states decide the future. In line with Polanyi’s writings on workers’ cooperatives, Gorz saw self-management as a route to autonomy. Social and economic units “small enough and diverse enough” could provide outlets for a wide variety of human talents and capacities.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> European Environmental Agency (2018). *Unequal exposure and unequal impacts: social vulnerability to air pollution, noise and extreme temperatures in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Muraca (2013). “Décroissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society”. *Environmental Values*. 22: 147-169.

THE DEMOCRATIC  
COUNTER-MOVEMENT  
NEEDS TO BE  
EMANCIPATORY AS  
WELL AS PROTECTIVE

Just as Polanyi supported a mixed economy, Gorz

did not consider total local self-sufficiency to be realistic and aimed for a restored balance between the conventional economy and the autonomy of communities. This was not a glimpse of a wide-eyed project for communal societies, but a realistic utopia built of a multitude of institutions: public, private, and civil.

The autonomy/heteronomy binary is readily applicable to current debates. In the context of moving away from a fossil fuel-based energy system, ecologists reject nuclear plants not only for environmental reasons but because these plants can only be managed in a quasi-military way. A local community can build a wind farm but never a nuclear plant. The ecological thinker Cornelius Castoriadis argues that, in a heteronomous society, the way society is imagined cannot be questioned. Emancipation requires autonomous individuals capable of questioning the social laws as well as themselves and their own norms. In this way, autonomy does not only refer to models of self-management, but to the social and personal imaginary. The lens of autonomy/heteronomy can be deployed to evaluate proposals for a “great transformation”. The European Commission recently launched its European Green Deal and, happily, it acknowledges the role of citizens and envisions spaces for

people to express their ideas and work together

on ambitious action. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Citizens and energy communities are recognised as important actors for the first time in the EU’s clean energy package but, similarly, what this will translate into remains to be seen.<sup>6</sup>

Autonomy also finds its expression in the commons. Often established because self-organisation simply makes sense and can be a source of joy in and of itself, commons initiatives fulfil human needs where states and markets fail. In the neoliberal era, it is no coincidence that a new wave of commons is gaining ground. Research by Green think tank Oikos shows that, at least in Belgium, the commons is not merely an urban phenomenon but is growing just as rapidly on the outskirts and in the countryside. An essential difference between cities and other areas is that growing numbers of progressive urban municipalities are aware of the great potential offered by new forms of public-civil cooperation. Bologna introduced a regulation on the commons in 2014 that has inspired around 20 other Italian cities to structure ways to sustain the commons. In Belgium, peer-to-peer theorist Michel Bauwens created a commons strategy plan for the city of Ghent in 2017. In the Netherlands,

<sup>6</sup> The clean energy package sets the framework for future EU energy policy. Shaping how electricity is produced, transported, consumed, and traded across borders, the legislative process was completed in 2019.

the city of Amsterdam has included the commons in their local democracy strategy.

A key concept is that of the “partner state”. Contrary to the neoliberal drive to shrink the state, the partner state refers to governments that want to contain the market to give more space to citizens’ initiatives. In most cases, hybrid experiments bring “commoners” together with local government and social entrepreneurs. An example of such a transformative case is the Buurzame Stroom project in a mixed-income area in Ghent, which aims to give every household the opportunity to install solar panels on their roof. However, not every roof is suitable and not every family can afford the investment. The local energy cooperative Energent and the city administration, together with other partners, tried as much as possible to reach people to connect them to the system. Two years on, the neighbourhood has doubled its generation capacity and has showcased how a smart grid can function on a local level.

Increasing numbers of cities like Ghent have a clear picture of their transition to a social-ecological future. Such a vision acts as a basis for new coalitions built within cities. In areas outside cities, by contrast, much needs to be done to realise the transformation, starting from the development of a new social imaginary. Double inequality must become a double decommodification. Infrastructures

that support a sustainable way of life without imposing costs need to be strengthened. Better public transport would go hand in hand with a citizens’ initiative that combined an energy cooperative with an electric car-sharing platform, for example. The second point is territorial decommodification. Instead of forcing regions to compete over inward investment, governments need to reassume responsibility for their territory and support cooperation between major cities and peripheral areas. To make these transformative policies a reality, Greens will have to build broad coalitions of the middle and working classes abandoned by the neoliberal political mainstream. This process will require enriching democratic life through participatory spaces and practices. The counter-movement that emancipates people and enables citizens to experience autonomy will win out in the end.



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