

From the Green Wave to Eco-hegemony

Article by Marc Martorell Escofet

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Despite its relative youth, the Green movement has had a profound impact on society. Today, many of the concepts and problems first identified by Greens have become part of the political mainstream, with parties of all stripes proclaiming their green credentials. Yet, across much of Europe, the real power needed to implement lasting solutions remains a distant prospect. Marc Martorell Escofet looks at how a growing public consciousness around issues such as the climate crisis could be a way to change this.

Back in 2019, in the now seemingly distant pre-Covid-19 era, the “Green Wave” seemed unstoppable. Historic electoral results for Green parties in countries such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Ireland seemed to indicate a growing trend across Europe, that also reached the European level at the May 2019 European elections. The European Green Party was the rising star in a new European Parliament that seemed to be entering a new phase, leaving behind Brexit, far-right populism, and Grand Coalitions, and looking towards new challenges – with the climate crisis foremost among them. At last, it seemed that those in power could no longer simply maintain their business as usual, and even European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen had begun to talk about the European Green Deal. Election results and political developments across Europe, such as those in [France](#) and [Spain](#), along with the widespread mobilisation of young people protesting in the streets, signalled that for European citizens increasingly viewed the climate crisis as a top priority, with local councils and regions declaring the climate emergency all over the continent.

Then, in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Was it the perfect storm for Green aspirations of institutional conquest?

A growing call for change

Thus far, political ecology’s strategy of choice could be described as one of “evangelisation”: Greens have tried to convince society, with varying degrees of success depending on national realities, that their proposals were common sense, especially in relation to the climate crisis, and that implementing them would not only be beneficial for humans, but also for the planet. In other words, Greens aimed at winning the battle of ideas, both on climate and more broadly, and at building up what Antonio Gramsci called cultural hegemony.^[1] We should, however, see it as a Pyrrhic victory. Yes, Green proposals regarding climate alleviation are now at the centre of the political debate, thanks to effective campaigning and an improved understanding about the reality of climate change across society; yet, in most cases, it is not Greens who are leading and implementing these ideas. The worrying trend is that such policies are seen as technocratic initiatives. With climate change being evident to most people, Ministries, institutes, and companies are the

ones taking the lead. Ecological proposals are adapted to suit all kinds of ideological preferences, and the political forces in favour of preserving the status quo seem to be championing them — as they still hold the balance of power in institutions throughout the world.

Climate actors in civil society are adapting to this apparent consensus by scrutinising political action and proposals and calling out empty rhetoric and gestures. As a result, denouncing greenwashing is now commonplace in most environmentalist organisations. However, the immediate actions that need to be taken are asked of the same institutions that led us here — that is, to the current climate crisis. As Ernstson and Swyngedouw argue, there has been a depoliticisation of the climate, as the issue seems to have been taken on by political actors across the board[2]. The climate has become a terrain of mainstream political competition where Greens face the challenge of distinguishing themselves.

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Through their efforts, Greens, climate movements, and NGOs that have long campaigned for climate change mitigation measures, have made these ideas more acceptable to the broad majority. At the same time, Greens run the risk of becoming redundant —in the sense that almost any political force or party can now put forward a proposal for an ecological transition, or at least can claim to be in support of such a transition even if this commitment amounts to little more than greenwashing. It seems, therefore, that the Green Wave, which emerged from the social consensus about the existence of the climate crisis, now finds itself up against an electoral ceiling which it is unlikely to be able to expand beyond, as long as Greens continue to base their proposals and strategies on the need for an ecological transition. At least, in a post-pandemic world.

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This is why the development of a “climate citizenry” – a cohort of climate-conscious citizens who have been converted by the messages from Greens and the broader climate movement about the urgency of this issue – is so significant for Green demands to gain ground. For these citizens, not only has the climate crisis become a top priority, but they are also eager to mobilise in order to demand that climate change mitigation policies be put into practice. Yet for some, this does not translate into direct political action and support for those who are willing to put in place the sweeping changes and broad reforms

that are needed. In order to convince these citizens about the need for a re-politicisation of the climate, it is insightful to draw on systemic analysis such as that of [Andreas Malm](#) or the “[tell the truth](#)” demand from Extinction Rebellion. Both concepts force political ecology to be honest if it is to take over the institutions: the former refers to the need for a total systemic change, meaning that ambitious policies that push the line forward for climate policy must be applied. The latter refers to acknowledging how we arrived at the climate crisis, and specifically identifying who is to be held accountable for that. Combining both, it becomes clear that, in order for political ecology to be fully in line with the challenges the climate crisis poses, it needs to demand regime change, and not only argue for more effective reforms to be implemented.

Green visions must be firmly rooted in reality

What are the implications of this realisation, in the system we live in? Our current democracy is ultimately a political system where elite change takes place by peaceful means. If we aim for the Green Wave to maintain its potential strength, we should ensure our objectives are clear. In her work *Reform or Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg argued that what differentiates a revolutionary from a reformist is the will of the former to change the system, whereas the latter only aims at aesthetic reforms that don't involve real, substantive change. In the 21st century, such a dilemma — whether to continue with climate reforms or push for a paradigm shift — is one that Green movements must confront.

It is important to acknowledge that the changes society needs to implement are highly radical, and to be understood as drastically changing our way of life — or, at least, the Western model. To work towards these, the Green Wave must expand its institutional takeover, as only from holding the political power can ambitious Green proposals be fully rolled out. However, this push for change should not be conceptualised as a single revolutionising event, act, or moment in time, as the scope of Green policies and ambitions go well beyond this. In the world we live in, aiming at creating a *tabula rasa*, simply ignoring that Green policies are built within the neoliberal order, is naive. An effective strategy, therefore, is one aiming not only at reaching power, but maintaining it for long enough that the changes and solutions put in place are no longer reversible. Greens need to appeal to the climate citizenry — and thus use the widespread concern for the climate as a stable electoral base from which to grow.

Eco-hegemony as a counterforce to populism

In Europe, we generally understand populism as a strategy identified with the far right; we associate it with fear-mongering speech and the scapegoating of marginalised and under-privileged groups. However, the Latin American emancipatory tradition sees it as a tool aimed at supporting progressive policies. As Ernesto Laclau argued, building a “people” through politicising the multiple sovereignties that make up the state is a necessary step to maintain the climate of opinion that sustains a progressive government.[3]

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Álvaro García Linera, Vice-President of Bolivia between 2006 and 2019, provides an example of this. He argues that, in order to obtain the power, the dominated segments of the population need to organise to sustain the political struggle against those who hold the power. Following the experiences in Bolivia, he argues that only through broadening the alliances between those who began the political struggle, and those who joined the cause later, can political change be fully implemented. In other words, the Bolivian experience shows how, in order for a progressive government to obtain and remain in power, it must not only convince its support base, but also broaden it so the political support becomes hegemonic across the whole of society.

Politicising the climate, making it a platform from which we can build actual governments, requires the creation of political subjects, or “peoples”. In fact, these subjects already exist: we can see them in the climate movements and in the broad, undefined category of the climate citizenry. So, while populism is a strategy that aims at recovering an illusory national sovereignty that could rule the world as it supposedly once did, eco-hegemony, conversely, should aim to build a democratic base of peoples, or of citizens, that pushes those in power to deliver the necessary measures to tackle the eco-social crisis. This image of “peoples” would not be based on imbuing spaces of belonging with mythical significance by reclaiming sovereignty, but rather on trying to empower citizens for them to lead the way towards a Green institutional revolution.

The power of alliances to deliver change

For a full discussion of eco-hegemony in practice, it would be necessary to look at cases where Greens have been in power for a sufficient length of time to need to seek continued electoral support for their policies. Such cases are extremely limited, however some insights can be gained from the Catalan experience – specifically that of Barcelona.

After the hard, first lockdown in Spain from March to May 2020, people rediscovered the importance of having a city where life is actually possible. Climate movements organised to even go even further beyond traditional demands: the *Recuperem la Ciutat* (Reclaim the City) platform demanded spaces within the city dedicated to community life, while the *Revolta Escolar* (School Revolt) movement gathered several schools, parents’ organisations, and climate activists demanding safe and clean school environments, free from cars and pollution.

Such movements could not be understood without the local council initiatives that put the city at the centre of climate change mitigation measures, with superblocks or car-free areas around schools. However, both these movements surpass institutional dynamics, as they aim to reach their objectives in a more immediate timeframe than that in which public policy generally operates, and push for more extensive action than was originally foreseen. Indeed, they demand that the City Council take immediate action in most schools in Barcelona, while the institutional timing is subject to each project’s planning and implementation.

These highly demanding movements represent, of course, a possible danger for a rising political ecology, in that they clearly show the limits for delivering public policy. At the same time, such a dynamic is its greatest asset: social mobilisation creates a climate of opinion that allows the incumbent government to be more ambitious in its institutional work. In terms of creating the cultural hegemony that all progressive policies need in order to be maintained, this process can be compared to populism, but it pushes political ecology to go beyond its own limits – clashing with the systemic ceiling our market democracies impose on all political parties.

In a post-pandemic context, with rising social inequalities, building a political ecology adapted to the current age cannot be based only on climate change mitigation.

Connecting climate and quality of life

The cases mentioned clearly involve policies that could be described as “Green”. Both are related to improving the environment, even if they have a more direct relation with society – they are, after all, within our comfort zone. How could eco-hegemony be expanded beyond those boundaries?

In a post-pandemic context, with rising social inequalities, building a political ecology adapted to the current age cannot be based only on climate change mitigation. These experiences demonstrate the potential for people – those who are concerned about climate change – to be mobilised and involved in the process of change Greens are calling for, when their priorities align. Would parents’ organisations occupy city streets if they were not motivated by a sense of concern for their own children’s health? Perhaps those who are dedicated activists, but it is doubtful whether the majority would.

One of the basic tenets of political ecology is to defend life on Earth, for humans and non-humans. A strategy based around eco-hegemony should consider life not as the mere state of existence, but as the capacity for living with dignity. Such an approach would see material needs – housing, food, health, etc. – and post-material ones – clean environment, comfort, energy, etc. – as inseparably intertwined. The defence of life, both as a political platform and a political strategy, could pave the way towards eco-hegemony, allowing Greens to provide the radical change we all need.

[1] Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers.

[2] Ernstson, H., & Swyngedouw, E. (2019). Politicizing the Environment in the Urban Century. In H. Ernstson, & E. Swyngedouw, *Urban Political Ecology in the Anthro-po-obscene: Interruptions and Possibilities*. (Questioning Cities). Routledge.

[3] Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso.



Marc Martorell Escofet is a climate activist involved in the Catalan Green Party. He holds a BA in history and a MA in International Relations. He has been focussing his activism on how to communicate Green policies towards a broad audience.

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