

Global Green Politics in a Time of Crisis

Article by Peter Newell

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As the debate continues over ideas and visions about what the post-pandemic world could and should look like, it is time for Greens to make the case for a global green politics that lays out a real alternative to current ways of thinking about the economy, security, international development, and sustainability.

In many ways, green politics has always been global. Historically, Greens have always been concerned with global peace, gender equity, and sustainability. Yet there is an anomaly. The academic field which dedicates itself to the study of global politics, international relations, has ignored insights from green politics about the discipline's core concerns – security, economy, and global governance – let alone its contributions to ideas about the state, international development, and, of course, sustainability. This oversight is not just an academic question, it has a knock-on effect on the real-world practice of global politics. Global environmental politics has received much attention through international negotiations and accords, but its more radical twin – green politics – has been neglected.

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The distinction between the two goes back to the distinction that is drawn between “environmentalism” and “ecologism”. The former relates to working within dominant paradigms to address the symptoms of environmental damage. Ecologism, on the other hand, addresses the root causes of environmental destruction in today's economic and political systems. As Andrew Dobson put it in *Green Political Theory*, a single-issue environmental campaign “treats symptoms”, while green politics proper “deals with causes.”

It is also the case that, with some exceptions, green thinkers have failed to articulate the implications of their ideas for foreign policy and the international system. As Laferrière and Stoett wrote over 20 years ago, it is commonly assumed that, once a proper ecology society is achieved, “the global political system will simply sort itself out”. “Sovereignty, territoriality, interstate competition: all of these remnants of the Westphalian order will simply wither or fall into harmonious place” alongside the new ordering principles of “sustainability, non-hierarchical societies, decentralization, and participatory democracy”. This criticism remains valid today.

Another politics is possible

However, a global green politics is possible. Green political thought can – as I argue in *Global Green Politics* – be repurposed to provide critiques, alternative visions, and strategies to address the most pressing global issues of the day, from inequalities and increasing conflict to climate change and biodiversity loss. Both the theory and practice of green politics provide pertinent critiques, normative visions, and proposals for a concrete strategy to the realm of global politics where they have been actively neglected.

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Mainstream approaches to the discipline of international relations, as well as its practice, treat capitalism (or industrialism) and militarism as givens and rarely take into consideration the ecological basis of all life. The result is that conventional international politics proceeds from an assumption of infinite growth, peace through militarism, and deference to elite politics. The prerequisites for a sustainable society might be thought to include stability, order, and peace. Yet common conceptions of international politics pursue these through state-based militarism. From an ecological point of view, the idea that such “realist” strategies will provide security or stability is illusory. Peace and sustainability are likely to remain a distant prospect in the current global capitalist economy. For many Greens, the ecological order sustaining all life on Earth is a metaorder within which the international system of states and other actors is just one component. As the authors of *Planet Politics: A Manifesto for the End of IR* write, international relations “is undone by the reality of the planet”.

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There are no international relations that are not ecological, nor that lie outside of ecology. Interstate relations, war, and trade are only possible because of specific socio-ecological conditions that determine their viability. There is no international relationship, no interstate system, no war or trade or investment flow that is not built upon and that does not embody and disrupt the ecologies on which it depends. Ecology sets the limits of the possible in a very profound and basic sense. Yet the consequences and implications of this fact – for it is an a priori fact – for questions of welfare, security, let alone sustainability, are systematically ignored in theory and in practice.

Bolder alternative visions, alongside new strategies and politics are required, even if grounded in relatively old traditions in some cases. Green politics, extended and more clearly articulated to deal with today’s global politics, has a key role to play.

Green visions for global politics

Climate breakdown and now the pandemic have seen green thinking in relation to economy gain increasing influence, both in domestic and international politics. Departing from conventional ideas held by both the political Left and the Right, degrowth, post-growth, and prosperity without growth have all gained increased attention in recent years. But thinking about strategies for reaching these have often been under-developed. It is clear we need a “just transition” to a post-growth economy by rebalancing and re-embedding the economy, supporting socially useful production, and re-purposing finance for the common good. Contrary to the sudden and disruptive shocks of a global pandemic, change has to be made by design: managed decline of those sectors that are incompatible with the goals of the Paris Agreement, for example, and expanded support for those sectors that will play a leading role in a green economy.

The current crisis has only underscored the need for such a shift from an economy organised around quantity to one based on quality and provides an opportunity for resetting the priorities of economic life. Prioritising welfare

and prosperity overgrowth at all costs in recent months has received public support and emergency industrial conversions could be extended to a broader re-purposing through new investments in jobs and infrastructure along the lines of the proposed Green New Deal. The basis would have to be secure and decently paid work and a deliberate move away from casualisation and precarious contracts for the poorest in society. Cooperatives, social enterprise, B-Corps, and non-traditional business models that put welfare above short-term profit maximisation all have a part to play.

Greens, drawing on their feminist roots, also point to the critical importance of the care economy and unpaid work. The current crisis has drawn attention to the value of the care economy within families and communities with the rise of mutual aid groups, as well as in the formal economy, with renewed appreciation for the work done by health workers and frontline service providers such as teachers. The heavily gendered care economy is what sustains the formal economy. Many Greens have supported a universal basic income scheme for decades precisely to recognise this fact.

But there has not been a similar recognition of the relevance of green thinking for the international system. The green critique of a globalised capitalist economy, which sees global supply chains as fragile and non-dependable, can help us re-orient ourselves after the pandemic. Global supply chains based on just-in-time production have reached their limits. The model is vulnerable to a range of disruptions (pandemics, economic shocks, environmental impacts). On this point, Greens have long supported localisation, a development that is today accelerating as producers and consumers adapt to disrupted supply chains. Attempts to rebuild local supply chains – particularly for food, but also for essential medicines such as paracetamol and antibiotics – are likely to be pursued further as European countries seek to become less reliant on production in India and China. A greater emphasis on political and economic autonomy and self-sufficiency could spark a rethink about what products should be acquired through international trade, and what can be provided more locally, not only to increase resilience but also to boost local economies and reduce environmental impacts.

Green ideas also emphasise re-designing our system of global governance. Going beyond critiques of global economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization and World Bank, they highlight the need to ecologise and democratise global governance, in terms of revising the content of international law and the mandates of key global bodies. But also in terms of their procedures so that actors with a greater stake in the future of humanity have a greater say, such as youth organisations and environmental defenders such as indigenous peoples. This would need to be combined with the decentralisation of some powers and enhanced forms of progressive regionalism and stronger roles for bodies such as the EU's Committee of the Regions. Green support for principles of subsidiarity can be invoked to offer a guide to the appropriate level of decision-making.

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In relation to international development, Greens are critical of extractive, export-driven, globalising models of wealth creation that are imposed onto countries of the global south through the provision of aid and unequal trade deals, including by the EU. Green international development would emphasise “re-commoning” and protecting the livelihoods of the poorest and most vulnerable in the world from incursions by states and corporations. It would allow governments greater autonomy to choose their own development paths, free of the constraints and proscriptions of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, but respectful of ecological limits.

Many of ideas for changing global politics in different arenas interrelate in practice. For example, rolling back militarism and regulating and reducing the arms trade would diminish conflict, one of the primary drivers of poverty and insecurity in the world. Likewise, a shift towards more localised economies would sever some of the exploitative supply chains that drain poorer countries of their wealth.

The coronavirus has also thrown up awkward questions for governments the world over about security: what is to be secured? And for whom? Some, at great risk to their citizens, have sought to delay responses and are pushing hard for a rapid return to business as usual, prioritising growth over the welfare of their citizens. Poorer and more vulnerable citizens – the elderly, the unwell, migrant workers far from home, and workers employed precariously – are, by design or by default, the victims of such a strategy.

This speaks to the need not only to take human security more seriously, but also to revisit what the real threats to our collective welfare are. Whilst mainstream accounts of security would point to terrorism and war aimed at the nation-state, a green perspective might point to poverty, ill health, violence, insecurity, and environmental devastation. Security is tied to securing peoples' ability to secure food, water and energy grounded in an alternative notion of sovereignty as being about control over livelihoods rather than a territorial boundary.

Rather than respond reactively to crisis, green politics aims to find the social and institutional roots of violence and insecurity, such as militarism and extractivism. They critique both the scale of resources committed to militarism – globally, arms expenditure runs at around 1.7 trillion dollars a year – and suggest how they might be redeployed.

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Towards global green politics

Emulation is said to be the greatest form of flattery. In which case Greens should be content that many of their ideas about alternatives to GDP, shorter working weeks, deepening democracy through regional governments and citizen assemblies, a Green New Deal to rewire the economy for decarbonisation, and more are now routinely discussed and advocated by other political parties across Europe. Even more radical and ambitious ideas such as universal basic income and the need for industrial conversion are coming to the fore as sound proposals to respond to the coronavirus.

These are the entry points for bringing Green visions to bear on today's politics. These ideas now need to be extended to global politics to challenge the mandates and strategies of global institutions such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization and the isolationist, militaristic strategies of reactionary leaders around the world. These ideas instead advocate resilient and sustainable economies that value work and prosperity in more meaningful ways; renewed efforts at disarmament and arms control to address some of the causes of global insecurity and to free up critically needed resources for immediate security threats related to health and environmental degradation; and strengthening the architecture of environmental governance to combat climate change, whose impacts will likely dwarf those of the current pandemic. One proposal gaining traction, and recently proposed at the UN Security Council by former Irish Prime Mary Robinson, is a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to leave large swathes of fossil fuels in the ground in a fair manner. Currently, fossil fuels are not even mentioned in the Paris Agreement.

But there is clearly much further to go. Frustrated by electoral systems that punish smaller parties and operating at a time of increased populism, right-wing extremism, and international tension, green ideas face huge challenges in gaining further traction. Greens often lead the way by saying what needs to be said, based on a politics of principle and truth about the future. This stance does not endear them to state elites and corporations that benefit from unsustainable development and from peddling myths about green growth and technological fixes.

Engaging with potential allies and supporters of green ideas including (some) trade unions, social movements working on housing, land, gender, and indigenous and farmers' movements, is critically needed. The "evidence-based hope" that local examples can provide, the recent performance of Green political parties, and an environmental movement emboldened by youth activists, all point towards a stronger position to make the case for the value of green thinking for all aspects of our politics, including the international. The time may have arrived for a global green politics. Let us hope for all our sakes that this is the case.



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