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# Alexander Langer’s Case for An Ecological Conversion

**Article by Clara Bassan**
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Doubtful of the radical change sustainable development promised since the 1980s, Alexander Langer set out to theorise another model that demanded personal commitment to justice and a simpler way of living. Although he does not offer a blueprint for policy change, Langer’s influence on green politics and philosophy of an “ecological conversion” have much to offer on mobilising mass support for the European Green Deal and its promise of a just transition.

Alexander Langer is regarded as a founding father of the Italian and European green political movements. He was a transnational politician able to operate at every level, from local to international, but focusing on Europe during his term as an MEP (1989 to 1995). His eco-pacifist activism was an original blend between a commitment to the peaceful coexistence of people and an ecological conversion of society. Langer would accompany his thinking with a search for tangible and practical solutions, create opportunities to bring together different activism experiences, and continuously broaden the interaction between institutions and civil society.

## Forming a political identity

Raised in South Tyrol, the predominantly German-speaking Italian province that borders Austria in the north-east of the country, Langer was active in promoting bilingual groups and magazines that encouraged meeting and dialogue between the three different linguistic communities from a young age. His young activism was marked, since the beginning, by a commitment to dialogue and coexistence and a deep Christian faith. His university years in Florence brought him into contact with notable Catholic dissidents.

The 1970s saw a period of activism for Lotta Continua, a far-left extra-parliamentary organisation. But it was during a period of study and political activism in Germany that Langer witnessed first-hand the birth of grassroots civic and environmental movements. At the end of the decade, he decided to return to South Tyrol, a region with which he would always maintain a strong connection, and which would be an important point of reference for his thinking. He was elected a provincial councillor on multiple occasions; as part of the New Left and subsequently of Alternative List for another South Tyrol and later of Green alternative List. He fought hard against the region’s quota system based on ethnic – linguistic declaration as established by the census, which he believed created ethnic cages that further divided linguistic communities.

During the 1980s, Langer became a leading figure in Italy’s emerging green movements, he was an important observer of nascent European Green parties especially of German-speaking circles. One of the founders of the nascent green political movement in Italy, Langer theorised and advocated for an independent political force that would represent a

“third bloc” alongside the mainstream right and left of Italian politics.

Throughout his life, he crossed paths with some of the era’s most interesting thinkers. But the intellectual who influenced Langer’s vision most was probably Ivan Illich. However, they diverged on their engagement in the political sphere. While Illich remained outside of political institutions, Langer was always both an institutional politician on the one hand and an activist on the other, not only in environmental movements, but also in pacifist and international solidarity movements. He was heavily involved in transnational movements, NGOs and movements campaigning for ecological conversion, such as the *Fiera delle Utopie Concrete* (Concrete Utopias Fair) and the Climate Alliance network, as well as environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, WWF and *Legambiente*, to name but a few.

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## From South Tyrol to Europe

Elected as an MEP in 1989, Langer took a clear-eyed approach to the challenges thrown up by this crucial year in global and European history. In his first term, Langer served as co-president of the first Green group in the European Parliament. As such, he strove to reconcile the differing visions of various member parties and, together with Greens from Mediterranean countries, succeeded in giving the group a pro-European impetus. He was engaged to an openness towards Eastern Europe and East-West dialogue, to the defence of human rights and minorities, and the peaceful resolution of ethnic conflicts both inside and outside Europe (including Cyprus, Israel-Palestine, the Caucasus, Tibet and Kurdish autonomy). Langer also chaired interparliamentary delegations with Bulgaria, Romania and Albania, as well as participated in numerous parliamentary missions. The final years of his term were mostly dedicated to trying to establish dialogue in the Balkans conflict. Deeply disappointed by European inaction, Langer was one of the founders of the Verona Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, a network of NGOs working to encourage dialogue between different Yugoslav groups advocating for non-violent solutions. At the same time, he was also involved with groups campaigning for peace and human rights, like the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly and the *Movimento Nonviolento* (the Non-violent Movement) to name but a few.

Staunchly pro-European, Langer was the embodiment of a supranational politician who championed European values. Local and European dimensions were meant to transcend the nation state and consequently contrast the rise of nationalism through a transfer of powers to the local level as well as to supranational institutions like the European Union. Langer supported greater political integration in the European Community before economic and market integration. He believed that the European Parliament needed to strengthen its powers and the European democratic system.

The European Community was also supposed to be a partner for the Global South and the new Eastern European countries. In the latter half of the 1980s, Langer’s environmental

thinking had already begun to take a more global approach. Alongside others, Langer was one of the founders of the *North-South Campaign: Biosphere, Survival of Peoples, Debt* which campaigned from 1987 to 1993 to convert developing coutries' debt into a common ecological debt, arguing that the Global North owed a much greater environmental debt to the South and that an alternative development model was needed. He grasped that there was a strong link between consumption in developed countries and environmental impacts in developing ones; between the planet's survival and social justice. As an MEP, Langer was heavily involved in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and in the alternative forum organised by NGOs by promoting the North-South Campaign.

He believed that reassessing North-South relations also meant making countries in the industrialised North recognise their responsibilities and the need to limit their consumption. On the other hand, countries in the South would have to stop relying on an economic development model that was incompatible with nature and look for different paths with the least environmental impact. These are just some of the ideas that can be found in his thinking on an ecological conversion.

*Langer was the embodiment of a supranational politician who championed European values.*

## Thinking ecological conversion

The idea of ecological conversion is currently being discussed thanks to Pope Francis's second encyclical, *Laudato si'.* Alexander Langer developed his ideas about ecological conversion in the 1980s but, when read today, they offer relevant takeaways. His thinking starts from the realisation that production and consumption systems oriented towards profit seeking and maximum growth no longer appeared sustainable as early as the 1980s. Together with rising environmental awareness, with recognition of ecological destruction and the global interconnectedness of environmental problems, he focused on the urgent need for ecological conversion.

As he himself explained, the term "conversion" was a deliberate choice over "revolution" or "reform". At the core of his thinking is the idea of repentance and a critical look at how we have lived up to now. The term conveys remorse, a change in course, and a commitment to repair damage done. Furthermore, it promises greater personal involvement. "Conversion is not just a spiritual term, but also a productive term, an economic term. It means converting our economy and the way our society is organised, to relationships with greater ecological and societal compatibility, less injustice, fewer social disparities, less distance between privilege, on the one hand, and deprivation, on the other."

The premise of this reasoning is that neither the environmental disasters of the time, nor the scientific evidence, of which we have more than ever, had managed to create enough fear to convince society of the need for radical change. Moreover, he warned of the danger and inadequacy of imposing this conversion, thus eschewing a sort of eco-dirigisme.

Langer was also critical of the term "sustainable development", which appeared at the end of 1980s. Although he recognised a certain awareness about limiting growth in the phrase,

he felt that the term “development” did not promise real change.

So how could an environmentally sustainable civilisation be made desirable? According to Langer, there needed to be a “cultural and social rethinking of what is considered desirable in a society or a community”. This meant “new (maybe ancient) cultural and civic beliefs, largely developed outside of politics and built instead on religious, ethical, social, aesthetic and traditional foundations.” In other words, establishing an alternative conception of society, a new prosperity. Abandoning the famous Olympic motto of “citius, altius, fortius” (faster, higher, stronger) in favour of an alternative Langer coined “lentius, suavius, profundius” (slower, deeper, gentler). A more frugal, more balanced, more sustainable lifestyle. A simpler life.

In his best-known piece of writing on ecological conversion, Langer also suggests some priorities to focus on, thus demonstrating his broader understanding of the challenges that this conversion could pose. He does not question the importance of stricter regulations, advanced environmental tools and technologies, or precise environmental assessments. But he warns that these will not be truly effective without deeper change that challenges the drive towards expansionist and profit-oriented growth.

The idea of limits and self-limitation is central to Langer’s thinking, both in the personal and social spheres. “Limits are not just natural, but historical and cultural too. Where to set these limits is a political, social, ethical and cultural choice.” Indeed, the growth mindset will not just suddenly stop. This change will come about through individuals and communities making choices that are more compatible with the environment. It must be emphasised that these choices do not have to mean impoverishment, but rather an “enhancement of vitality and self-determination”, which will come about thanks to an alignment of personal and collective choices.

*Langer believed in a more frugal, more balanced, more sustainable lifestyle. A simpler life.*

This behaviour must also be seen in the political sphere, resulting in a politics of self-limitation and democratic balance. Langer believed that political systems are incapable of making self-limited, long-term decisions. He was more confident about citizens’ initiatives, NGOs and voluntary work, and the green movement give, especially in their ability to give the marginalised a voice and not fret over electoral support. Civil society could further other interests through “direct action, campaigning, boycotts, protests, non-violent resistance” and a “refusal to finance destructive politics and economics”. Yet, Langer believed politics is vital for incentivising change and promoting ecological conversion. He also underlined the need for an ever-closer connection between local and global action. In particular, it is important to be able to identity a level at which the connection between ecological motives and individual choices is plainly visible to people. In his mind, it is the local level that can achieve this, but he makes clear that this community level must be visible: only then is the argument about self-limitation convincing, since it is tangible and verifiable. Rather than an authoritarian approach involving imposition from above, Langer

proposed a new, positive ethical motivation at this level in which individual choices, to self-limit, are meaningful and are not driven by fear of external sanctions.

Langer’s critique does not get into technical arguments on, for example, how to start an energy transition, a highly relevant topic today. Nevertheless, it is also important to consider his ideas in their proper historical context. Back in the eighties, an historic period which, for example, saw Italy swept by a wave of consumerism, Langer already understood the crucial need for a change in mentality and lifestyle, as well as a greater awareness of the limits of nature and production. He thought about how to encourage and drive environmental choices, highlighting the need to abandon a development model that was no longer appropriate when it came to environmental resources and social justice. As far as today’s green transition is concerned, current thinking should recognise the importance of a conversion narrative. Indeed, it is perhaps worth asking just how effective techno-fixes can be if not accompanied by some of Alexander Langer’s ideas.

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