Climate Targets Are Not Enough

Article by Armin Nassehi, Peter Unfried
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The climate problem is of a scale and scope beyond the grasp of politics alone and building a sustainable society will require more than a radical manifesto, argues Armin Nassehi. In this interview from before Covid-19, the sociologist presents a way forward for climate politics in Germany that looks beyond the lines of left and right and reaches out to the worlds of science, business and government.

Peter Unfried: Some people think you're a loose cannon because you've moved beyond traditional left-right thinking.

Armin Nassehi: And because I don't believe that there's a clear or practicable – or even a revolutionary – solution to our problems. There isn't one. We have to solve our problems with the means available to us because we don't have any others.

Theory-conscious leftists doubt that the core of middle-class society could or would act in everyone's interest.

What does the "core of middle-class society" actually mean? It's so boring to think of the middle class as just a social milieu or something. First of all, you can't bring about a revolution with the engine running; you need to shut it off. Society's resistance, its structure, its inertia and its lack of impressionability are enormous – it's important to remember that. We simply have to recognise how difficult it is to intervene in systems, habits, and life practices in a structurally complex world. This is the decisive question, but one that hardly ever comes up in political discussions: how do strategies actually work?

The German government has adopted the Paris climate targets but isn't doing much to meet them and push through the necessary socio-environmental changes.

The problem is that all that we have are targets. Anyone can set targets. I recently gave a lecture at a gathering of German-speaking climate researchers, 400 people, who said that they are constantly explaining to politicians that they need to reduce CO_2 emissions by so many percentage points, or to employ some technology or other. The politicians then sign climate protection targets, in some cases to the best of their knowledge and belief, but the targets don't work because they mistake the destination for the journey. Anyone who sets precise targets runs the risk of failure because the goal already looks like the solution. What matters is how to arrive at the target.

Could you give an example?

Saying that a 3-litre car consumes exactly three litres too much fuel, for instance. The big goals are characterised by massive hubris and ignore what is operationally possible and currently feasible. But recognition can also lead to devaluation. Take Fridays for Future: they have been virtually overwhelmed with recognition because their goals are so immense and are formulated as the last stand of humankind. This level of recognition, however, devalues their engagement because it demonstrates the emptiness of certain concepts.

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Why?

Because politicians, parties, the public and industry praise their goals, but basically fail to put forward any concrete solutions. Thus, with regard to Fridays for Future, you're either "for" or you're "against", but neither solves the problem. The Alternative for Germany simply turn the tables: there is no climate change as far as they're concerned.

So, what's your suggestion?

Classical industrial society was built around two axes: ownership of the means of production, and the relationship between cultural conservatism and liberal openness. Today we're having to deal with the consequences of modernity and its complexity, which can no longer be dealt with politically along traditional party lines.

So the decision isn't between Green-Black, Green-Red-Red or Jamaica?

Politically, yes, but politics is only one system among many and it is trapped in its own logic. There's also legal logic, technical logic, economic logic, scientific logic. Nowadays it's a question of forging alliances between the ways of thinking and functional logics employed by different systems. Solutions to climate change are already the subject of painstaking work outside of the political sphere – in scientific laboratories, in companies, in urban planning departments, by architects but much of it remains surprisingly invisible.

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Many people think that systems just have to change to work for the greater good.

Beautifully said, a strong statement – which looks like the solution, but actually just describes the problem. If there's one thing you can learn from a social theory viewpoint, it's this: the greater good can only ever be discerned from concrete behavioural patterns. It's simply not possible to address "the whole" – it's not accessible. Unfortunately, this is our inescapable baseline condition and it's a bitter pill to swallow. We can't change the way that systems function, but we can use their resources differently. The point is to tap into the competencies within the systems, not to switch them off. It's more about concrete changes rather than catch-call solutions.

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What does that mean?

None of these systems can override their own logic. Business has to make money. Politics is about getting re-elected in order to exercise power. The media needs its daily stories. Legal standards need to be applied. These logics are at times conflictual and cannot be causally managed from a single place. What is decisive is how the different logics are "translated" into each other. And we have to acknowledge that without economic performance and political stability, things will become difficult – and not only in relation to climate change.

A moral argument says that limiting global warming requires that we radically change our lives and our societal model.

The issue of climate change, however, makes the problem clear: there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for societies. In a differentiated system, the idea that an easy solution might exist is paradoxical. In fact, even democratic politics find it difficult to adapt to environmental dangers, because the people whose behaviour needs to change are also voters. A fair number of people therefore dream of authoritarian forms of prohibition, regulation, and centralised management; sometimes there almost seems to be a longing for a Chinese-style system. The tragedy is that the greatest goals can only be achieved with the smallest steps. Just like in real life.

There is a pseudo-political discourse claiming that the Greens are becoming more left-wing, while the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) is moving more to the right – good or bad, depending on how you look at it. How useful is this?

They're both moves in the wrong direction. It isn't a matter of becoming more left-wing or more right-wing because this leads us away from the issue at hand. Talking about the Right isn't really necessary anymore. Ethnic issues and cultural difference are not our basic problem; their importance has been exaggerated, and where there are problems, there are solutions. Some of these are quite restrictive, but they don't necessarily have to be right-wing. The need to develop new forms of justice and equity – especially in relation to digitalisation, with the creation of new jobs in certain sectors going hand in hand with job losses in others and unliveable wages – is a problem that needs special attention, there's no doubt about that.

But if the solutions still aren't radical enough?

Okay, you can support radical solutions, you can support banning everything immediately. But few people will support you and you will not build a political majority. In the end, that's the decisive factor in politics – whether you can achieve a majority.

But can I bear the thought of being just another indistinct part of a majority? We're not culturally familiar with that.

The luxury of wanting to belong to the minority requires a great level of trust in the majority.

Why can't the classic people's parties [the catch-all parties of the centre-left and right] cope with the problems we're currently facing?

The principle of the classical people's parties was that certain interests were to some extent identical with a social sphere. The distinction between capital and labour, the CDU and the Socialists, a stable, made up of opposing elements that were directly dependent on each other. That no longer exists. People's parties can no longer rely on this. They now need to relate the different social logics and systems to each other in the most appropriate way.

Who is currently able to break down the old boundaries in federal politics?

At present, it's no coincidence that this expertise isn't necessarily concentrated in the traditional people's parties but rather lies with the Greens. This is also reflected in election results and opinion polls. The aggressive criticism directed towards them – in part from right-wing conservatives – is a kind of redirection of the aggression felt towards Merkel, who has been resented for her ability to think across political divides. That someone like [party leader] Robert Habeck is succeeding in this at the moment is impressive.

I understand that you developed your concept of new alliances for the Greens. Why?

Well, I have been working on the "translation" of ideas for a long time, and at first, this had nothing to do with the Greens. But then I discussed it with Robert Habeck, and also with Katrin Göring-Eckardt [co-chair of the Green group in the Bundestag]. My suggestion is to create alliances of actors who operate according to different system logics. Establish forums in which these different logics can be mutually unsettling and where conflicts can be fought out. Smart thinkers aren't unique to a single political party. But someone has to take on the role of opinion leader and deal with the conflicts that arise.

The public has begun to see the federal Green Party in a new light thanks to Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck. Some media outlets think they are the subject of too much attention.

The grovelling approach towards Habeck adopted by a large part of the media is embarrassing and demonstrates a loss of judgment among commentators. This has no effect on his cross-party thinking. What I find more impressive is how Annalena Baerbock manages to succeed in front of business representatives and to build bridges into other logics. This is clearly a first step towards being able to relate the different logics of society to one another. Although in a completely different historical situation, this is structurally similar to the post-Godesberg Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), but different in its logic to the concept of a left-wing majority with the potential for polarising opinion, as supported by Katja Kipping [co-chair of Die Linke], for example.[1]

Is the idea of a left-wing majority dead?

No one knows but in terms of content, yes. There is a social milieu that would only vote Green if they were sure that Red-Red-Green wouldn't come out of it. This isn't a question of the same old anti-Left criticism. Many perfectly reasonable people are making this point. What is likely is that a political force needs to face up to a paradigm shift. It's no longer a question of the left-right axis, but rather of whether political and economic dynamics, scientific knowledge and legal structures can be successfully related to one another. Strictly speaking, this has always been the central theme of capitalism, and the consequences of capitalism, but the classic constellation of actors divided this up into milieus. Today, we have to bring economic actors – the economy, as we like to say – on board. It's the only way. I fear that a left-wing majority would be more likely to prolong the classic lines of conflict.

The environmental movement and the Green Party have been portrayed by their opponents as bourgeois post-materialists searching for meaning. Now our youth is on the streets demanding that we take action to stop the earth from being destroyed, and their future with it.

The standard themes that define our politics have been replaced by an external problem. Everything else is open to interpretation. Loss of freedom? No such thing. Justice? We already have it. But there's no other way of interpreting global warming. Traditionally, the environment has been more of an internal issue; a question of distribution. The Marxists had a certain idea of the material environment, but only in relation to productive forces – the fair distribution of the spoils of environmental exploitation. Nowadays these productive forces are no longer the solution, they're the problem. And if we want to solve this problem, what should we do? Shut them down, change them, or maybe develop them even further? This challenge can't be solved with the usual tools. The classic milieus

– and with them the classic conflicts – no longer work.

Can you be more specific?

A solution to the CO_2 problem won't be found in the sphere of justice and equality, nor in the rather bourgeois idea of voluntary renunciation – and certainly not by introducing state control and bans. Energy consumption patterns vary greatly according to social milieu. A carbon tax would provide meaningful incentives for industry, but it would be meaningless in terms of changing individual behaviour in socially deprived groups, where there is already lower energy consumption. For higher earners, fuel prices or a carbon tax would hardly prevent people from driving or flying, but perfect transport infrastructure might – for example the Berlin-Munich high-speed train line. Such ideas are feasible but they aren't given enough attention.

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What is the role of the Greens in proposing these solutions?

It's a party that occupies the middle ground; this was always held against them by the Left. In this respect, the Greens have much more in common with the CDU than with the Social Democrats because there, too, they have to work with similar framing problems. The decisive strategic partnership for experimenting with alliances with different logics will most likely be with the CDU, partly because that should be the real subject of modern conservatism. Let's see if they can bring together the right people. It doesn't look so promising at present, but I've got a few names in mind. The Greens want radical transformation without a radical revolution, and they believe in technical solutions. They are both business-oriented and protest-oriented.

Is that an advantage nowadays?

You can say that you don't want capitalism, but that doesn't invalidate its logic. You have to use the logic of the market in such a way that it moves things forward. We have to help businesses make a profit with the right things, as outlined by Ralf Fücks, for example, in his concept of liberalism. Contractual models between the state and business, a completely new relationship with the trade unions, which are incidentally also having to prepare themselves for transformation, and, last but not least, the question of intelligent governance through technical, legal and economic incentives – these are the only way to make long-term policy. Translating the different logics into one another as opposed to nullifying them by squeezing them into a central idea, thus bringing the liberal idea of the separation of powers from the political sphere into broader society. Such a development would be transformative. I consider that to be a good strategy. Perhaps it's not necessary for the Greens to become more left-wing and or more conservative, but simply more liberal – perhaps in the sense that they need to find "docking stations" for different system logics.

Kretschmann, Habeck, and Al-Wazir have been trying to achieve this type of translation for years. But do you not think that for many post holders, this a radical contradiction to what they have learned, what they feel, how they grew up?

Yes, but not only for the Greens – it's a contradiction for everyone. Somehow they have to lose their feathers so they can grow new ones. We see it in the CDU, which has no idea of what it actually wants to preserve. We see it

in the Liberals, who should be experiencing their heyday. We see it with the Social Democrats, who have completely lost their focus. And we see it in the Left, which has certainly gone through an interesting learning process. But a hubristic, controlling approach no longer works. A complex system cannot be manipulated.

So, how does it work?

It's about intelligent management, about creating momentum. I know this sounds incredibly naive, but it's the only way. It's the equivalent of what science calls interdisciplinarity. Of course, people each have their own interests. But it must be made clear that they can only be achieved in strategic partnership. You have to think beyond boundaries. Only smart thinkers can do that. And this isn't only a political programme – it must also be thought through in entrepreneurial, trade union, scientific, legal and, last but not least, technical terms.

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This interview was first published in German on taz.de.

Footnotes

[1] The 1959 Gosdesberg programme of the German Social Democrats saw the party adopt a social democratic agenda of regulating the free market and definitely move away from a Marxist class politics aimed at overthrowing capitalism.

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