Green Space in the History of Political Ideas

Article by Reinhard Olschanski
June 21, 2019

The big three of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism has long defined the political outlook of the general public, intellectuals, and academic institutions. However, developments around the world confirm that another system of ideas has joined their ranks. Greens embody modernity's fourth political idea, environmentalism, which in its broad sense includes ecologism as a political movement and an idea.

What does a more detailed picture of this achievement look like? What conclusions can the Greens draw from it? How should a Green party such as Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen in Germany describe themselves?

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to understand how a new concept such as environmentalism enters the pantheon of ideas. The paradigms of modernity were not always securely in place. They are not Platonic ideals or eternal 'idols' of being, but were promoted to their lofty positions by secular, historical processes.

The environmental paradigm

Liberalism, firstborn among the political ideas associated with modernity, was the political spearhead of Enlightenment thought and of an emerging bourgeoisie. Conservatism came second, despite its dignified and somehow eternal appearance. It was a reaction to liberalism, the Enlightenment, and the transition to a bourgeois society. It may have longed for the old but was nevertheless a dialectical spark, a stubborn reflection on the cost of change. Socialism was the third in a thoroughly antagonistic union. It responded to the plight of those who were freed from the old feudal relations of production and who gathered in the new industrial cities in the 19th century. Leaving aside the regressive authoritarians of the first half of the 20th century, it would take more than 100 years to come up with another fundamental idea, in the form of environmentalism. As its predecessors had done, it emerged to answer a specific problem of its time.

While the answers to the social question hinged on a critique of modern relations of production and focused on systemically mediated exploitative relationships between people, the new environmental approach focused on the technological context which enabled the conflict between humans and nature. The overexploitation of nature and the poisoning of the environment was at its centre. Technology and the material processes of production and consumption were no longer accepted as neutral or without alternative, but were open for criticism and change. The environmental critique, which called for more environmentally friendly and proportional 'green' alternatives, was popularised by experiences such as the nuclear disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima, as well as by proof that successful action is actually possible. Many rivers have been brought back to life, and the global ban on chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) halted the steady depletion of the ozone layer.

The environmental paradigm did not primarily respond to the material emergencies of the 19th century, but that does not reduce it to lightweight idealism. Environmentalism puts the relationship between humans and nature at the centre of attention and is in fact more 'materialistic' than the social paradigm. Climate change clearly damages the material interests of the poor, as the millions of 'climate refugees' show. Environmentalism is not just an idea

'for the rich', otherwise free of worries and hardship.

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At the same time, the environmental paradigm is not a class paradigm. It does not express, in the manner of early liberalism, the position of the aspiring bourgeoisie. It is neither the conservative reaction of a feudal upper class to bourgeois revolution nor a working-class ideology of struggle against capitalism. Sustainable living and business offer something to everyone. Sustainability stands for the universal elements of a good life – clean air, healthy food, sustainable development – that should be accessible to all.

The environmental approach is thus a universal one that reaches well beyond the globalist ideas of economic liberalism and free trade. The working-class movement countered liberal globalism with the international solidarity of the working people – at least in places where it did not succumb to the drug of nationalism. Environmentalism, for its part, is concerned with problems that do not stop at national borders such as radioactive fallout and greenhouse gas emissions. Alongside economic globalisation, climate warming is the ultimate global process. Its globality is why national populism has its head in the sand on environmental issues, especially climate. The admission of human responsibility would directly lead to solidarity beyond the borders of the nation-state.

Global warming today is a side-effect of our confrontation with nature. It strikes back at human activity according to natural laws, triggered by the release of too high a level of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. In this light, environmentalism, often dismissed as somewhat insubstantial, appears rather more concrete than the ideas of those who oppose it. Jean-Paul Sartre described such events as 'counter-finalities', the consequences of human interventions in nature which wind up being hostile to humans without this hostility originating from a human enemy. For nature and its laws are not personal adversaries. The fight against counter-finalities does not simply involve a struggle in which social groups side with each other in the name of solidarity and then operate via an 'us versus them' model. Rather it is an 'us versus it' fight against the impersonal agency of natural processes, however human the initial trigger.

This new paradigm has reached the hearts and minds of millions of people in one and a half generations. It is one of the most important ways in which we relate to the living world, and is expressed in a differentiated form of politics. Its scope can be seen in the areas with which it has an immediate link, which directly concern nine out of fourteen current German federal ministries: environment, nature conservation, nuclear safety, food, consumer protection, agriculture, research and science, health, construction and housing, transport, economy, energy, economic cooperation, and development. Even if the Greens in Germany worked exclusively on 'environmental' topics, they would not be the niche party that they were long labelled. Their main theme alone gives them a political portfolio that can easily compete with, and often outperform, their competitors' core offerings in both breadth and urgency.

The emergence of alternative technologies, standards, and procedures is the result of a long reflection on the environment impact of human processes. The growth of renewable energy is a triumphant example of this development. The energy transition is reorganising of a fundamental sector of the economy and a comprehensive environmental transformation is on the agenda. Evidence that environmentalism – the innovative and highly attractive Green 'core brand identity' – has become one of the main ideas of the modern age.

Broadening the horizon

The Greens' environmental focus provides a solid footing from which to extend their reach even further. The party has long claimed to be a 'full-range provider' covering the spectrum of political issues. And they already do, as the the Green-led government in Baden-Württemberg, Europe's most technically innovative region, is proving. The Greens have wisely not allowed themselves to be lured onto the slippery slopes of a 'people's party' project. This concept is based on relatively homogeneous core constituencies that are only present on a limited basis in German society. The Greens have avoided the traps of both narrow interest group representation and catch-all politics that led the Christian Democratic Union and Social Democrats in Germany to a considerable lack of clarity, high affinity for lobbyists, political syncretism, and all kinds of lazy and formulaic compromises.

But if the German Greens are not a people's party, then what are they and what is their path to greater relevance? Reinhard Bütikofer has made an important contribution to this debate. He recommends that the Greens see themselves as an "*Orientierungs-, Bewegungs- und Dialogpartei.*" The party must maintain a clear sense of its origins as a social movement and engages with institutional processes without losing itself within them (*Bewegung*). At the same time, the party should provide an orientation for society as a whole and define a new, future-oriented mainstream (*Orientierung*). In Bütikofer's words, it is necessary to "identify fundamental reform projects and fight to make them happen, regardless of the political constellation." This objective requires a special, inclusive style of politics (*Dialog*). Being able to establish and maintain political hegemony should not be confused with being a party that claims to have the answer to everything. Instead, dialogue serves to "consciously create points of connectivity within one's own viewpoints for the benefit of others." The purpose of political communication within a democracy is not expressive self-aesthetics. The point is to express one's own themes in such a way that they are comprehensible, convincing, and tie in as closely as possible with the concerns of who you are speaking to.

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Hegemony is also built through 'outward strength'. The German Greens need intellectual and cultural bridges to different social milieus, and to develop a more independent and conscious use of the content and semantics that originally took shape in other traditions. In his book *Who We Could Be*, party co-chair Robert Habeck shows how language can create realities as well as being an instrument for processing them. If the Greens are to take their claim to autonomy and greater relevance seriously, then they must engage in the semantic work of re-creating or reformulating traditional language and concepts that can be of use today – even if these came from the liberal, social and conservative traditions.

A good point of departure is an analysis of the recent history of the liberal, social, and conservative forces in Germany as 'embodiments' of the other political paradigms.

Liberalism: the second string to the bow

The traditional representative of liberalism in the German party landscape is the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Liberalism, however, is older than both the FDP and the Federal Republic itself – and has multiple different manifestations. As with all political paradigms, a reasonable question to ask is "who are you", closely followed by "and how many of you are there?"

In the early days of the Federal Republic, the FDP was a small party and a haven for nationalists seeking influence. But the nationalists' progress was curtailed in the 1960s, and the party became a forum for lively debate and embraced the traditional left-liberal line on social and civil liberties. Following the victory of market-radical

liberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the FDP departed from left-liberalism in a move that weakened the party in the long term.

The newly formed Greens was among the parties that gained most from the FDP's radical embrace of the free market. The Young Democrats, the former youth wing of the FDP, shifted their focus to the Greens. It was not not just them, the Green party was in step with a broad radical democratic zeitgeist that was liberal but with a 'small l'. Civil rights activists and members of the women's, lesbian, gay, peace, and anti-racism movements made the Greens into the party responsible for an epoch-making 'fundamental liberalisation', which, to use a Heideggerian phrase, could be designated as a new 'clearing of being'. The Greens became both the legitimate heir of German left-liberalism and its innovating force. One can even speak of a second identity comparable to environmentalism which yoked the Greens to the Enlightenment and the freedom and democracy movements of the modern age.

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Green liberalism does not mean political clientelism in favour of the market's lone wolves. It is far more associated with claims to universal applicability. The Kantian aspiration to act according to maxims that could be willed into universal law is deeply embedded within the German Greens. The environmental paradigm, rooted in a concern for a common natural world shared by all people including future generations, already contained aspects of this universalism. Similarly, socio-political solutions should be universalisable – acceptable to all, or at least to as many people as possible. They should be inclusive and benefit the most disadvantaged members of society. Green liberalism and individualism stand for self-determination from a universalising and decidedly pro-social perspective.

This special liberal claim was in evidence during the refugee debate. While others flirted with populism, the Greens remained true to their fundamental beliefs. They now reap the rewards. They increasingly represent a 'backlash against the backlash', a broad democratic majority who oppose hateful rhetoric and the regressive spirit of populism, as well as of a broad 'liberal' camp extending far beyond traditional liberalism.

But Green liberalism is also about effective market regulation to provide the necessary conditions to direct market forces towards environmentally friendly forms of production. The Greens must be the force for intelligent, sustainable innovation across the board, including digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and autonomous vehicles. Green liberalism is in this sense a broader synonym for 'ordo-liberal'. It opposes market radicalism that wants to reduce regulation and exclude environmental and social costs of production.

The Green conceptualisation of the social

As the FDP, the German Social Democrats (SPD) squandered strategic opportunities. The party fought against the new social movements of the 1970s, including the environmental movement. The party's environmental deficit might be surprising, given that the transformation of industrial societies is actually rather close to the concerns of this long-established party. But corporatist involvement in the industrial policy of the Federal Republic slowed down the environmental reorientation of the Social Democrats – and continues to do so, as shown by the recent battles over the brown coal phase-out .

The shift towards Tony Blair's 'New Labour' under Chancellor Schroeder plunged the party into further difficulties. The Hartz IV labour-market reforms of the red-green Schroeder-government triggered a long-lasting, unfinished dispute within the SPD and the German Left as a whole – including within Greens. The SPD leaders

made this attempt at modernisation to respond to the socio-economic upheavals of the time. But the move spoke to a more profound change in the idea of the human, a move from the classic *homo solidaritus* of the social democratic tradition and towards the *homo economicus* of the liberal economic tradition. Participation in three grand coalitions from 2005 onwards further weakened the party's social democratic identity. It is now gripped by a deep melancholy, unable explain the task of social democracy in the 21st century.

Social issues remain very much part of the outlook of the German Greens. Unlike the SPD, it was never a Fordist party. The Greens lacked the Social Democrats' breadth of members, their symbiotic relationship to the trade unions, and their hierarchical organisational thinking. Instead, the Greens live and think in 'flat' hierarchies, which imply an understanding of subsidiarity by which the state refuses to take decisions in a paternalistic and authoritarian fashion, but promotes self-determination and personal responsibility. Here the Greens are the bearers of a special 'social liberal' heritage. This heritage corresponds to the individualisation of today's society but differs from the traditional middle class-oriented FDP individualism, which would like to leave the work of political universalisation to the invisible hand of the market.

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The social and welfare policies of the Greens are based on three pillars: Kantian citizenship-based claims of self-determination and universalisability; empathy for the various social problems of our time (housing, poverty in childhood and old age, the care crisis, social exclusion); and the knowledge that the poorest suffer most from the consequences of environmental degradation.

The Greens employ a concept of justice that brings together a number of different aspects. The lack of gender justice is not seen as, to use a Marxist term, a 'secondary contradiction' of the social. They stand for equal opportunity and fair access to education, and for a 'policy of recognition' that supports individuals to develop their own particular identities and live free from constraint and discrimination. And they know that the demand for distributive justice is not obsolete – nor can it be displaced by a focus on ethnicity. Social issues should not be disarticulated as the struggle of 'our own kind' against migrants, refugees, and 'foreign workers'. This social approach, which is decidedly anti-populist and anti-nationalist as well as committed to the Enlightenment, is an important point of conflict between the Greens and sections of the German Left (*Die Linke*) party.

Conservative perspectives

The Christian Democrats represent the conservative camp in the Federal Republic. The Christian Democratic Union party is rooted in three traditions: conservative, Christian social, and liberal. At present, it is suffering from a two-front war brought on by its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). The CSU has been sharpening its own conservative profile by positioning itself against 'the refugees', and by doing so has only strengthened the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). A second, internal party conflict was directed against Angela Merkel – their own chancellor. Her refugee policy was the primary target, as well as a more general criticism of the (rudimentary) modernisation Merkel has imposed upon the party.

What do the internal struggles of the conservative camp mean for the Greens? Do they have to mean anything at

all? Attempts during the early years of the German Greens to commit the party to a right-wing conservative, 'blood and soil' form of environmentalism thankfully failed. The Greens have gone in the opposite direction towards liberal environmentalism with a social face. What is then the point of today's Greens reflecting on conservatism?

The Green Minister President in the state of Baden-Württemberg Winfried Kretschmann answers this question in his 2018 book *What We Want to Rely On*. He argues for a "new idea of the conservative" and underlines how the environmentalism and civil liberties-focused and socially conceived liberalism of the Greens have remarkable intersections with cosmopolitan, non-reactionary conservatism. Environmentalism is in fact grounded in an Enlightenment dialectic which found its first home in conservative thinking – namely in the awareness that revolutionary change brings about not only positive but also destructive consequences. The reflection on the potential effects of technology so central to the environmental paradigm is well established within conservative thought too.

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Christian conservatives imbue the environment with their own meaning and talk of 'preserving the integrity of creation'. An individual's motivation to protect the environment, the climate or biodiversity can be powered by different ideas from scientific insights to moral, philosophical or aesthetic considerations and theological positions. Making use of these overlaps is a central task for Green 'ideas policy'. One notion around which to orient such work is John Rawls's 'overlapping consensus', according to which groups with apparently inconsistent views on certain issues can agree on key principles of justice.

A second meaning of conservatism, linked to the Latin root *conservare*, to keep intact, lies in the preservation of the open society. History shows that the stability of democracies depends on conservative support, and that risks emerge when conservatives shift their allegiance to populist and ethnic nationalist camps.

A Green approach for the 21st century

The German Greens have long realised that they are more than the 'black sheep' children of social democracy or the libertarian/anarchic or romantic/conservative flesh and blood of the middle classes. The Greens insist on their independence. With environmentalism, they embody an essential human concern that shapes modern lifestyles and determines the ethical, aesthetic and socio-cultural demands of millions of people. Combined with a spirit of cosmopolitanism and social empathy, their approach is sufficiently viable and sustainable to provide an outline for a constructive political approach for the 21st century – just as the other parties embodying earlier political currents did in their time.

The Greens can no longer shy away from acknowledging their place as a political force and a current of thought within the pantheon of the great ideas of modernity.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

Dr Reinhard Olschanski studied philosophy, music, politics, and German language and literature in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Urbino (Italy). His doctoral thesis was written under the supervision of Axel Honneth. In addition to having held a range of teaching posts, Dr Olschanski has many years' experience as a political advisor in the German Bundestag, the State Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, and the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg. Dr Olschanski has published widely on a variety of topics including politics, philosophy, music, and culture.