

## **If You Want Peace, Prepare for War Ecology**

**Article by Edouard Gaudot, Pierre Charbonnier**

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The decarbonisation imperative threatens the very structure of the international order, founded on fossil-fuelled economic growth and interdependence. Could climate action drive strategic alliances instead of escalating geopolitical fragmentation? A conversation with French philosopher Pierre Charbonnier.

**Edouard Gaudot: Your latest book *Ecologie de guerre* (“War Ecology”) continues in the same vein as *Affluence and Freedom*: the material conditions for peace now pose a problem, like they do for freedom. This raises the question: just as reduced consumption represents an infringement on freedom in our imaginaries, does decarbonisation carry the risk of war?**

**Pierre Charbonnier:** Yes. In the same way that a yearning for freedom is expressed as a yearning to push the boundaries or challenge the uncertainties associated with experiencing the physical world of nature, we have built our thinking about and implementation of security – in other words peace – on this same idea. Simply put, the factor that drives conflicts between sovereign entities is scarcity. Because we live in bounded spaces and because war breaks out when there are disputes, the idea – first put forward by liberals, then adopted by almost everyone else – is to find a solution to the problem of scarcity. Peace through abundance.

This outlook lies behind popular expressions like “gentle commerce”, “the peace dividend”, and “democratic peace”, concrete examples of which include the Marshall Plan, the European Coal and Steel Community, and the Nord Stream gas pipelines, which are all mechanisms of pacification through infrastructure, especially energy infrastructure. We are heirs to this tradition, just as we are heirs to a tradition of freedom through productivity gains in the face of natural limits.

We are still living with this widely held belief that we pacify distributional conflicts by expanding the material base of society – in other words through growth – and we pacify geopolitical conflicts, open or latent, by creating a harmony of interests around systems for the production and movement of goods in general and energy in particular.

Our political system and forces are shaped by this tradition, yet they require a thorough re-examination. Often, we don’t want to see the conditions for peace, so we overlook or hastily and simplistically address them, shrugging off questions of international security by declaring universal peace. It’s a problem encountered by political forces that claim to offer responses to environmental and climate issues, because they too are victims of this tradition, in that they have been led to overlook social issues, on the one hand, and geopolitical and security issues on the other.

**Yet these political forces, including but not only Greens, have historically emerged from a critique of this universally held development model. Isn’t it a paradox, then, for movements born out of concern for the planet to find themselves faced with a confrontational definition of international relations?**

The paradox isn't insurmountable, but I think we should consider its scale. For political ecology, in its broadest sense, the legacy of Enlightenment liberal universalism prevails, which discourages us from maintaining our bonds with local or national entities deemed obsolete. In this worldview, jealousy and conflict are things of the past, because we are rational beings, led by science and a quest for what is true and just. This development of law and its rationality in politics also applies to international relations – all the more so since science alerts us to the nature of environmental and climate risks.

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In this philosophical view, we should gradually realise we all belong to “one planet”, and liberal universalism should lead us to take seriously management of the global commons – water, air, the atmosphere, etc. There's a sort of continuity between Kant's perpetual peace, a harmony of interests in trade, and Greenpeace, with environmental protection as a way to resist the militarisation of the world, and COPs and climate diplomacy ushering in this (anti)globalist utopia.

This school of thought prevails among environmentalists. But there is another that is closer to Carl Schmitt's ideas about sovereignty, territory, and conflict: “Malthusian environmentalism”, which emphasises overpopulation, scarcity, and the depletion of resources. This literally “catastrophist” tendency predicts an intensification of conflict against a backdrop of collapse. It advocates drastic self-limitation in the use of resources, anti-natalist policies and strict curbs on migration. There is, of course, a sliding scale running from the Club of Rome to certain localist identitarian movements, but the idea is the same: a zero-sum environmentalism, where any gain is at the expense of others.

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Interestingly, in the history of political ecology, these two intellectual traditions have merged. While this may seem coherent, in strict ideological terms, it absolutely isn't. More troubling, this tension creates a degree of disorientation in the movement to protect the environment and global commons: should it endorse protectionist policies or economic sanctions against other countries? On certain issues the position is clear: to defend Ukraine, no fossil fuel revenues should go to Vladimir Putin. And green protectionism should be employed when China is deemed to be using overly polluting production processes and engaging in unfair competition. But this isn't really based on a coherent geopolitical doctrine that identifies allies and adversaries, nor a coherent policy on international trade in general.

**Hearing you describe this latent and not always acknowledged clash between Kant's perpetual peace and Schmitt's conflictual realism, one wonders whether it couldn't be overcome through an approach to the commons inspired by [Elinor Ostrom](#), who took both viewpoints into account.**

That's true. However, Ostrom's model is only applicable at a local and intermediate level. To my knowledge, the model is principally designed to resolve problems around free riding in confined spaces that can't be privatised. It is not clear whether there are any examples of its application in international relations. As soon as sovereign interests – states – come into play, the regulation of “free riding” at a

local level is no longer efficient, because there is an inherent nature to sovereign interest that cannot be dissolved in regulating the interests of actors at a lower level.

The climate question is utterly specific. It's quite different to a purely environmental issue, because it poses the question of how a state, or group of states, can maintain their geopolitical status while weaning themselves off of what has been essential for their survival for a century and a half: fossil fuels. It's a problem that must be confronted at its true level. This imposes specific constraints that cannot be avoided, neither through a hypothetical world government nor a proposal for common management.

**If we take this to its logical conclusion, instead of “war ecology”, don't we get “ecology is war”?**

Let's say “wartime ecology”. That's what I think should be understood from these words. The phenomenon of geopolitical fragmentation we're experiencing, as described in much intellectual and political commentary, isn't tangentially connected to the climate crisis – it's intrinsically tied to it. The major powers – the United States, China and, to a lesser extent, Europe – are re-building their extraction capacities and primary industries because they need strategic resources within their borders to build solar panels, wind turbines, and the like. That's because we can't depend on unreliable partners for what protects us, just as we wouldn't for arms. It's a new version of the security dilemma: you have to arm yourself to ensure peace, but in so doing you risk starting a war.

War ecology is both an opportunity and a risk. It is an opportunity because it forces power blocs to internalise the climate question in their investment, development, and employment strategies. The European Green Deal, for example, claims to reconcile competitiveness, growth, security, strategic autonomy, and so on. The climate question is no longer a slightly nebulous idea that lies above and beyond industrial, social, or strategic challenges.

However, the risk, which we're seeing increasingly clearly in the United States, is that the climate question is exploited for strategic ends by military interests. Thus, the Pentagon explains that it's vital to invest in alternatives to fossil fuels, because it's the only way to counter China's hegemonic ambitions, which are clearly related to their leading position in solar and countless other cutting-edge technologies. It's a means of turning the climate question into grounds for maintaining hegemony, or even challenging the geopolitical status quo.

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This is the tightrope that must be walked. And here the European Union occupies a promising position: it is neither hegemonic nor counter-hegemonic, which leaves us room to conduct wartime climate policies, which means policies driven by strategic interests, but without necessarily ending up in a confrontation with the USA or China.

**Our current political imaginary is a prisoner of the form we've chosen for our political community, which is the modern state. This is especially clear in your analysis of the failures of the COP and global climate governance. Science fiction has also grappled with this statist limitation to our imaginary. Do you think there are political and intellectual forces still strong**

**enough to inspire a sort of idealism in international cooperation? Or does the inter-“national” trump the “global”?**

The paradox is that the greater our awareness of our shared belonging to one Earth and our broad economic, geological, ecological, and energy interdependence, the clearer it becomes that this realisation is not bending the arc of history towards progress. The direction of travel is not towards political integration. Quite the opposite.

What's more, the earliest awareness of this shared planetary belonging emerged from strategic interests. During the Cold War, the Americans wanted to use satellites to look for Russian nuclear tests, and inadvertently developed climate science. In the atomic age, with its East-West geopolitical stand-off, this paradoxical connection between environmental awareness and strategic rivalry was already apparent. Today, it's even starker. The more we hold COPs, the more we listen to scientists, the more we become aware of the climate question, and the more national and international interest groups around the world repatriate critical resources to the territory they control.

That's why what's interesting in science fiction is our clash with extra-terrestrial civilisations. Like in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*. The first two volumes show how human geopolitics changes shape because the enemy is external.

**It's just the same problem you described but on a different scale.**

Exactly. But I think that, philosophically, it's much clearer. And it's no coincidence that it's a novel written by an open supporter of Chinese power.

Otherwise, universalisation vs. fragmentation is the key dynamic. However, we could see the emergence of a coalition of sovereign interests built on recognition of the climate emergency, its implications for security policy, and on the fact that it could be a catalyst for aligning international interests around certain technologies, development decisions, renewable energies, land use, urban infrastructure choices, etc., and that different geopolitical actors, recognising the necessity of such approaches, say to themselves: “This is the cornerstone of our shared interests and a bulwark against other groups”. It would be a way to really take the geopolitical dimension of climate seriously, not as a supranational transcendence, but as the catalyst for a fully fledged geopolitical alliance. Today, this coalition doesn't exist; principally because the major players in climate-compatible technological development are also enormous emitters. China leads the world in green technology, but also in emissions.

So, we need a debate on grand strategy. What is, for us Europeans, our relationship on these subjects with a country like China, all while being at odds with them on the treatment of minorities, technological surveillance, and so on? I don't think we can do without a strategy that looks to cultivate shared interests, particularly on climate, because it's also an effective way to break the Beijing-Moscow axis, and to avoid a harmful strategic alignment with Washington – especially today.

The other aspect is our relationship with other emerging powers: Indonesia, India, certain African countries, Brazil. What do we offer these countries so they side with us? Europe should build its foreign policy on a coordinated response to the climate question. That, for me, is key, far more so than the obsession with Trump.

**As well as climate, there's another burning issue for these countries: plastic pollution. The conference recently held in Busan, South Korea, to tackle this problem ran into powerful petrochemical interests and uncooperative geopolitical actors. Do you see it as part of this**

**strategy too?**

It would definitely be worth thinking about this aspect. One thing that is absolutely clear – and which is actually something positive to come out of a toxic history – is that the way to peace is through infrastructure. We can of course question the nature of the peace infrastructure that has been built, especially since the Second World War, and this carbon peace. But from a more structural rather than ideological point of view, the idea that peace is built on the shared, concrete and tangible interests of infrastructure is essential.

Hence, investment in renewable energy, in research from basic science to deployment, in recycling, etc. is crucial for creating shared interests. The same could be said for major stores of biodiversity and carbon, such as forests. That's why forest diplomacy with, once again, Brazil and Indonesia, and probably other tropical nations such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa, is absolutely fundamental. These countries are going to stop protecting forests unless we pay them.

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The president of Guyana repeated this recently. Ecuador tried it a while back, but it didn't work, because it was too small a country, and the question wasn't yet ripe. But Brazil seems to have a far more determined plan to do so. It's putting a gun to our head and saying: "We have something that you need but don't have: carbon sinks in the form of forests and biodiversity. Now you have to pay for it." As it happens, I'm in favour of us paying, even when budgets are squeezed. The oxygen produced and carbon captured by forests is a good investment.

Assembling such a coalition would be a game-changer. It would be the first time in history that a geopolitical bloc fought not just for its own interest but for the universal interest, too.

There will be a COP in Brazil next year. Today, COPs have lost some of their initial meaning, but they've found another in becoming places for negotiation and for seeking bilateral partnerships rather than universal consensus. I believe these spaces are important for building this coalition, and hope the European Union doesn't make too many mistakes in this area.

**Everything about what you're saying poses an existential question for the European Union. First because the EU is a project for shared peace and prosperity, and as such is a quintessential fossil fuel project. But it's also a project whose very reason for being is to transcend the nation-state. So, two paths lie open to Europe. On the one hand, could war ecology force the EU down the path of a state structure and see it become (as some would like) a supranational state going toe to toe with global competition? Or, on the other hand, should the European project redefine itself politically and concretely in terms of decarbonisation?**

That is, to some degree, the alternative facing us at the moment. Since the start of the Ukraine war, it has oft been said that Europe has re-found its legitimacy and returned to its roots by remembering that the reason it needs to be united is geopolitical; it's about the problem with its Eastern neighbour. What's more, geopolitics is tied to energy. The EU mistakenly thought that by buying Russian gas, it could tame

Russia; yet the opposite happened. Therefore, we need to decarbonise because it's a question of universal interest, the climate, strategic interest, and our security.

That's what [EU Commission president] Ursula von der Leyen has been saying since 2022. The problem is that we're not doing this. There's an ambition that isn't being translated into industrial policy that is properly thought through and put in place, nor into foreign policy that would involve going to see our friends in India, Brazil, and elsewhere and offering to build a coalition around these issues. Yet the deal is quite clear: forests, natural resources and development opportunities in exchange for human and financial capital, research and development, institutional solutions, engineers, planners, and nuclear technology. We could define shared interests.

But ends, even if explicit, are not enough. We need to provide the means, which raises the question of European integration. As we don't have a common budgetary capacity, and because of problems around governance, unanimity, etc., EU institutional reform seems essential to align means with ends.

*What do we say to the middle classes, and to the poorest, who are the most resistant to the transition today?*

Europe's structural energy dependence is obviously a weakness, one that must not be turned into an obstacle. We may dream of onshoring our energy supply, but we'll never achieve this 100 per cent, and Europe will always have dependencies. Yet these limitations can lay the foundations for alliances. The oxygen we breathe in Europe is made in Brazil. This means we need to build a relationship with the country that goes beyond the extractivist relationship we've hitherto enjoyed.

**As Europe and the environment go hand in hand, my last question is about the state of Green parties today. How can they adjust to this shift towards realism in international relations?**

I think that what we need to make progress on is a triple consensus: technological, geopolitical, and social. When it comes to technological consensus, the problem is that greens often hold things up, at least in France. We need to agree on what we're going to produce and how we're going to produce it, while also acknowledging that this could have environmental impacts. But compromises must be made, and this issue must be put to bed in some way so that we don't have to relitigate the merits of wind or solar power every time, even though this isn't optimal. Because reducing consumption is important, we can't achieve the transition with behavioural solutions alone. We also need solutions based on technology, substitution, efficiency and, where these won't work, reduced consumption.

And nuclear power also has a role to play. It's a low-carbon energy source, albeit a very expensive one with a lead time that makes it infeasible as a solution in itself. But the nuclear question must be addressed rationally, not in terms of values. It's a dangerous technology, but it works. A dispatchable nuclear fleet in France and perhaps in Europe has its use. If one day we can shut down every nuclear power station, I'd be the first to celebrate, but we're not there yet.

From the outset, we've been talking about finding geopolitical consensus. This means acknowledging that there are geopolitical fault lines and that we can't be at peace with everyone. Our foreign policy must be aligned on the climate question: this creates natural common interests with people who think like us and forces us to forge alliances with those who aren't quite there yet. I'm thinking of emerging powers

seeking green development. We must be capable of building these partnerships; otherwise, they'll be made with the other side, they'll be dangerous, and they'll pollute. I think we must embrace our partners' environmental modernisation without the slightest hesitation. These countries are asking for green development, not degrowth. Especially because, in the case of solar, for example, these forms of development are no longer as harmful as they once were.

The third consensus is social consensus. What do we say to the middle classes, and to the poorest, who are the most resistant to the transition today? These are issues which must be tackled at a domestic or even community level, but which have remained the poor relation in the current debate, despite the Yellow Vests episode.

That's why we must "de-environmentalise" climate questions. In any case, when we do something favourable for the climate, it's generally favourable for the environment, albeit in different terms. There's a question that must be seriously grappled with. If, in Europe, an alliance of political forces emerges and manages to set out a strategy for thinking and electoral success that builds consensus around these three areas, I think we'll make progress.

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