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Two Years to Save the Climate

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While climate action is commonly regarded as urgent, incumbent governments are too often happy to leave difficult decisions to their successors. Could reframing the climate challenge around near-future targets be a way out? Mission 2020 emphasises the need for immediate action, using existing technology, over business as usual.

In 2015, 193 countries signed the Paris climate agreement. The World Meteorological Organisation announced in 2016 that the level of CO2 in the atmosphere had crossed the threshold of 403 parts per million for the first time in 800 000 years. In 2017 this level reached 405 ppm. At the start of 2018, more than 15 000 scientists from 184 countries raised the alarm about serious developments and the disastrous state of the planet. Following this statement, the International Energy Agency announced that emissions had stabilised over the three preceding years, raising some hopes that greenhouse gas emissions had reached an all-time high in 2017. 2018 saw a raft of historic climate disasters around the planet: global warming was happening before our eyes.

The message from scientists is clear: to stop widespread suffering and a catastrophic loss of biodiversity, humanity must implement a more environmentally sustainable alternative than 'business as usual'. To avoid even more disastrous climate scenarios, greenhouse gas emissions must level off and decrease from 2020. Without a major shift in course, the capacity of the biosphere to support life will decline rapidly and a breakdown in society will necessarily become more likely. What should be done now?

Mission impossible? Target 2020

To promote this vital change in policy, some scientists launched Mission 2020, a collaborative campaign to raise ambitions and increase action through a range of key sectors, in order to make the greenhouse gas emissions curve level off and drop from 2020. According to these scientists, we must make a clear plan for the reduction of emissions. If we are slow to do this, and we do not take advantage of the current momentum, we risk having to make a drastic change in the future, threatening the stability of our societies. If emissions start to fall from 2020, the objectives of the Paris Agreement could still be met. The actors already point to some encouraging developments: there has been a certain decoupling of greenhouse gas emissions from production and consumption, more renewable energy has been produced, and the climate has been taken into account in economics and politics.

To prioritise action and raise ambitions, the authors identify six priority areas of action, based on climatology: increasing renewable energies and phasing out fossil energies; action plans to decarbonise towns and states and to accelerate the rate of energy renovation of building stock; increasing sales of electric cars, doubling public transport and reducing emissions in the aviation sector; reducing deforestation and ensuring reforestation to create carbon sinks, and favouring sustainable agriculture; ensuring that industrial emissions are halved by 2050; and finally mobilising public and private finance on a massive scale for climate action in the public and private sectors by 2020.

Spreading the optimistic message that things are only impossible if that is your attitude, the people behind the Mission 2020 initiative are calling for political decisions to be more informed by science, for increased rollout of available strategies (technological and social), and for sharing of success stories to promote increasingly ambitious objectives.

And where does political ecology fit in?

Faced with our nightmarish situation, political ecology cannot just continue doing the same things as before. After a long series of failures in climate negotiations and ecological transition policies, how can we update political ecology strategy? Looking ahead to COP24, how can we manage to convince all the governments in the world to declare something like an 'environmental state of emergency', and implement a 'general mobilisation of all citizens'? The Mission 2020 initiative has inspired some analysis, and can help develop some suggestions for political ecology.

First, scenarios involving a drastic reduction in emissions are often perceived to constitute a danger to democracy, due to the supposed inability of democracies to respond to long-term issues by sacrificing some short-term interests. However the hypothesis that an authoritarian regime, or even a 'green dictatorship', is vital for an ecological transition should be rejected, not just due to ethical considerations, but also for practical reasons. A regime with a centralised, monolithic, top-down power structure, not supported by a majority of public opinion, cannot impose an ecological transition by decree, as this must by definition release the energy, creativity and initiative of all citizens. However, if a democratic state cannot take concerted action, forge a national consensus, and find a balance in power relations without applying restrictions and legal sanctions, it will also be powerless. If democracy turns out to be powerless when it comes to the climate and other issues, it will become increasingly tempting to resort to authoritarianism. But authoritarianism is no answer and might lock in regimes even more inefficient in dealing with climate problems. True realism for democratic green parties now means political ecology making radical use of democracy.

It is also necessary to address the question of decoupling. Although there was a global decoupling of economic growth and greenhouse gas emissions in absolute terms between 2014 and 2016, the International Energy Agency reported in 2018 that greenhouse gas emissions had increased by 1.4 per cent in 2017, reaching a historical record high of 32.5 gigatonnes. The facts now contradict economic organisations and other institutions which argue that absolute decoupling is the key to combating climate change. Although the existence of absolute decoupling is vital for advocates of economic growth[1], a number of alternative economists, physicists, chemists and biologists have concluded that material economic growth is incompatible with reduction of our environmental footprint.[2] This should enable ecologists and green parties to definitively abandon the myth of absolute decoupling in their politics. The concept stems from an attachment to the dogma of economic growth, which has become unsustainable; it no longer increases well-being in rich countries, and it only serves to exacerbate inequalities, which in turn reduce the well-being of all citizens.[3] Other approaches focusing on well-being, happiness and quality rather than accumulation and quantity should find their way into public policy.

Reason and feelings in climate change

Although science is important for political decisions, as the real world imposes restrictions on human desires, human beings are moved more by emotions than by science and facts. Human nature often ignores long-term concerns and leads to errors of judgement, impulsiveness, aggression and negative emotions.[4] Certain people, like Churchill, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela and Obama, dared to develop politics based on emotions. Ecologists now need a narrative in their toolbox with a positive vision, images and sounds, and a discourse that can have much more emotional impact than figures, graphs and scientific articles. Political ecology must be able to speak in an appealing way about the joy of life, fun, simple pleasures, enjoyment of nature, cycling, slow food, the countryside, natural heritage, our spirituality and the power of people's action.

The struggle of political ecology is undeniably ethical and spiritual. Naomi Klein recommends that people should be inspired by historical struggles for human and civil rights as the struggles of ecologists are similar in many ways. They should be inspired by the strategies of their leaders, by the use of spiritual, ethical, moral and relationship-based feelings in political discourse, and the use of courts and laws to further the ecological cause.[5]

"Encouraging optimism and the attitude that 'everything is possible'" – Yes but…

Bringing together the Mission 2020 initiative and reflections on political ecology over recent decades, it is useful to sensitively revisit the narrative of optimism and overcoming limits to make progress in the reality of the 21st century. It is realistic to accept that certain limits cannot be overcome. Human desires and power are limited by the constraints of the human condition, the biosphere, and technology, and by the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. The 21st century is undoubtedly the time when humanity will have to give up the optimistic myth of omniscience and omnipotence, of unlimited economic growth, of infinite technological and scientific progress, and complete domination of nature. However there should not be a pessimistic narrative, as other limits are in fact illusions, and dogmas that can be overcome. Human history is not written in advance and it is made by those who act and innovate. Political ecology believes in the principle "there is always an alternative".

What now?

In the light of the Mission 2020 initiative and decades of experience of political ecology, an important lesson emerges regarding how to handle the notion of urgency. Urgency must be managed prudently. Overstressing the urgency could lead to a loss of political and public interest. If it is already too late to stop some negative impacts of climate disruption, it is still possible to choose the least unpleasant of various future scenarios. We should also be aware that "Where there is danger there is also salvation!" in the words of German poet Friedrich Hölderlin.

One must welcome the rapid growth in the number of initiatives for ecological transition, but it would in some ways be naive to conclude that change is happening, faced with the scale of the problems and risks. The moderate politics and gradual reformism of the centre-left or centre-right, and the commitment of liberal democracy to the market have proved to be unable to reverse the unsustainable trend. Radicalism is now true realism, and gradual reformism has become naive idealism. As Nicolas Hulot said, "Politics based on small steps doesn't work". Thus it is possible and desirable to push for an urgent general mobilisation within the framework of democracy, inspired by the experience of the wartime economy of the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1940s, but this time without a shot being fired.[6] It is necessary to recognise the political dimension of this battle, to bring emotions into politics, to accept the balance of power, and to take inspiration from historic struggles for civil rights.

In making at ambitious call for immediate action through shared institutions such as the European Union, as well through more responsive levels such as local government, Mission 2020 takes up this task. And as climate action becomes more pressing, having viable solutions at hand will be essential. In balancing the possible and the urgent, Mission 2020's approach offers a strategy towards out of the impending crisis that green movements in and outside of government should study closely. Though its targets and deadlines seem difficult, they are just the kind of pragmatic radicalism we need.

[1] Relative decoupling only means that the environmental footprint growsat a slower rate than the economy, which would be insufficient to decrease greenhouse gases emissions to zero. We need an absolute reduction in emissions, which probably means something like a material degrowth for the global economy.

[2] Especially Boulding, K. E. *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,* Environmental Quality Issues in a Growing Economy, ed. Daly, H. E., Johns Hopkins University Press (1966) ; Georgescu-Roegen, N., *From Bioeconomics to Degrowth – Georgescu-Roegen's 'New Economics' in Eight Essays* (1972) ; Arrow, K. et al.,

Economic growth, carrying capacity, and the environment, Science 268, 520–521 (1995) ; Meadows, D., *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (2004) ; Rockström, J. et al, *A Safe Operating Space for Humanity*, Nature 461, 472-475 (2009), Jackson T., *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2010).

[3] *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, R.G. Wilkinson & K. Pickett, 2009 et *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, T. Piketty, 2013.

[4] *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, D. Kahneman, 2012.

[5] We can already observe that political ecology is using more and more the judiciary in its fight for climate, clean air, biodiversity and ecosystems. The fundamental rights are often used as an argument in these judiciary processes. Some lawyers think that the environmental law is still underused whereas it can help to defend the health and environmental rights of citizens.

[6] *The U.S. Economy in WWII as a Model for Coping with Climate Change* , H. Rockoff, NBER Working Paper No. 22590, 2016.

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