

What Is Green Freedom?

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With its roots in the countercultures of the 1960s, the Green movement is, at its core, a quest for freedom. However, from its inception, it has harboured a tension between its call for individual liberation and the understanding that true freedom involves respecting limits. With this tension now caught in the crosshairs of the right-wing counter-revolution, the Greens must prepare their vision of freedom for today's fundamental political battles.

Try stopping a stranger on the street and asking what they think of the Green movement. At worst, they'll grumble about the bans and restrictions Greens want to impose in the name of ecological protection. At best, they'll agree it's important to protect nature and the planet we inhabit. But it's unlikely they'll describe it as a struggle for liberation. And yet, at its core, the Green movement is precisely that: a claim for freedom, both individual and collective.

When it emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Green creed fused environmental consciousness (which predates it by centuries) with a broader critique of modern life. It extended and reimagined the spirit of the countercultural movements of the 1960s, which themselves were demands for freedom.

In the 1960s, the post-war generation – the children of peace and of a new Europe – wanted their values, their voices, their choices, and their ways of life to be taken seriously. Their claims for freedom took many forms. In the Netherlands, the Provo movement baited violent reactions from the authorities through nonviolent protest. The hippie movement born on American college campuses, quickly crossed the Atlantic and played its part in the events of May 1968 in France. Feminism, too, was a movement for freedom – the freedom to reject tradition and social convention. Civil disobedience, rooted in the legacy of American naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, was back in the spotlight. Sexual norms, patriarchy, the state, the military, technology, religion, and conservative values – every form of authority was up for question.

It's within this rich mosaic of countercultures that the Green movement found its historical, political, and anthropological roots. At its heart, it expressed a desire for a different kind of happiness, a different way of relating to others. In Ernest Callenbach's 1975 classic *Ecotopia*, freedom is the cornerstone of the fictional green society that emerges on the west coast of the US after it breaks away from the rest of the country. The narrator, journalist William Weston, is taken aback by what he witnesses – not because it's shocking in itself, but because it clashes with everything he's been taught to believe about freedom, society, civilisation, and nature.

The Green movement's version of freedom is rooted in a philosophical and ethical return to nature. Since "culture" brought us to the gates of hell when it culminated in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, "nature" can offer an alternative system of values – or at least, so thought Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and the other philosophers of the Frankfurt School who deeply influenced the first Green movements in post-war Germany and inspired the postmodern critics of materialist consumption.

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Reconnection with nature and refusing to reduce it to a resource for human exploitation and control is central to the Green vision. But awareness of the destructive impacts of modern technologies, as per Rachel Carlson's seminal book *Silent Spring* (1962), does not stop at the conservative approach to nature developed by early Greens like Herbert Gruhl, a Christian Democrat who was one of the original contributors to the foundations of the German Green party. Indeed, the Greens' vision of nature also offers a new dimension to the emancipation narrative that powered the left and liberal movements in the industrial age: reclaiming freedom from the artificial needs created by corporate greed, refusing an alienating productivist system, liberating body and mind from the grip of corporate and state power, and deepening democracy at local, global, and European level.

In this vein, opposition to nuclear energy, for instance, reflects resistance not only to the alienating consensus of techno-science but also to centralised state power. Nuclear projects are often imposed without local consent. The fight against them is, fundamentally, a fight for democracy, community, and collective self-determination. What may have started as a "not-in-my-backyard" instinct quickly evolved into a "not-in-anyone's-backyard" demand.

Turning into a political movement, the anti-nuclear struggle transformed isolated resistance into a collective cause that rallied people far beyond Plogoff and Fessenheim (France) or Wyhl (Germany). At its core, the Green movement unites people who believe life offers something more than what's in textbooks or dictated by the state. There's something deeply democratic – and even anarchist – in that recognition.

The price of freedom

From its inception, however, the Green movement has harboured a tension between competing ideas of freedom: on one side, the call for individual liberation; on the other, the acknowledgement that true freedom requires us to respect the boundaries set by nature, and by life itself. Without these limits, individual freedom becomes meaningless.

For a time, this tension remained abstract, beneath the surface. It only really emerged when Greens began to engage in formal politics, because politics requires drawing lines between what's allowed and what's not, what's beneficial to the many and what's harmful, what's acceptable and what's desirable. As Greens reached the highest level of governance, entering governments as early as 1985,¹ they attempted to reshape society. But as they did so, they had to reconcile their support for individual liberty and free enterprise with their commitment to ecological and social limits.

This is seen, for instance, in the tension over which forms of energy to prioritise or abandon. A shift away from nuclear and fossil fuels towards renewables imposes constraints on markets, households, workers, and infrastructures. Likewise, reforming a food system that harms consumers and devours the planet implies limitations on individual desires, on farmers' practices, and – unless balanced by other policies – on livelihoods, particularly those of less affluent citizens. Green policies do not always fully address the risk of socioeconomic inequality.

Greens decided to participate in governments, they were quickly labelled as the party of restrictions – the ones who oppose new infrastructure and threaten your job; the ones who want to take away your car,

your steak, your vacation, your pleasures. Their embrace of ecological limits clashed with the dominant model of freedom defined by material consumption. As French philosopher Pierre Charbonnier summarised: abundance is freedom.

But the Greens partly failed to make their case that we had to change our ways and relinquish some of our freedoms – the freedom to pollute, to exploit, to dominate, to destroy – precisely to preserve the conditions of freedom.

Indeed, even when other parties adopt green policies – on agriculture, pollution, emissions, or taxation – it is the Greens who get the blame for limiting what modern life is about. In fact, as they became absorbed into institutional politics, the Greens sometimes began to lose the social power required to effect true change. Their technical expertise in energy, food, or transport has made them skilled policy designers but poor politicians. In becoming institutionalised, they lost what once made them bold and forward-looking.

They became experts at law-making and cleverly crafted policies, assuming that laws would change society. But while laws can shape behaviour, they do not change hearts or minds, at least not before the next generation. They assumed that raising awareness, disseminating scientific knowledge, and pressuring decision-makers would compel the change. And even when in charge, they found themselves trapped between the radicality of the necessary changes they advocated and the inevitability of compromises, which are the very currency of politics.

Entrenched in electoral competition and the legislative process, Greens often lost sight of the deeper work needed to transform society: public education, civic engagement, and grassroots learning. Respect for nature, for limits, for each other, isn't just about language. It's learned in schools, at work, in politics, and in everyday public life.

This tension is further mirrored within Green parties themselves, whose strong emphasis on autonomy and internal democracy often clashes with the need for efficiency, party discipline, and clear leadership. Increasingly, critics say, Green parties have come to resemble NGOs: an advocacy movement without a base, whose constituency is made of activists, experts, and concerned citizens, but which fails to enlarge its audience to engage with the public.

Even worse, they allowed the “freedom” component of their DNA to be diluted, if not contested, by the heirs of the counterculture of the 1960s. Suddenly, prohibiting the use of private jets, recommending a vegetarian day in schools, or phasing out the use of certain pesticides were denounced as unbearable encroachments on personal and entrepreneurial freedoms. The new conservatives are claiming their freedom to not change.

Consequently, the Greens' own roots in individual liberation have come under fire as part of the backlash against so-called “woke” politics (which is, in fact, the mere continuation of the fight for equality and recognition essential to social justice). Again, Greens are partly responsible for being caught in the crossfire, because they failed to produce an appealing framework of emancipation connecting the dots between feminism, decolonial struggles, environmentalism, and social justice.

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From servants to masters

The good news for the Green movement is that its critique of the dominant model of freedom is more relevant than ever today, and the social and ecological freedoms it stands up for have the potential to resonate deeply with the struggles and injustices many people face.

One of the great underexplored issues of the 21st century is the push to extend finance and money even further into people's lives and time. In the late 20th century, we saw a drive to get more and more people, particularly women, into the workplace. The two-income family became the norm, essential to a secure, stable life. And – despite valiant resistance, especially in France – working life was extended with the rise in pension age.

This, combined with the pressure – most intense on the young – to make yourself a product, to curate an online presence for both your professional and personal life, and to have a second job or side hustle, has further encroached on “free” time. So too has new technology: many workers are expected to answer their work phones or check their emails at any time of the day or night. A motif for our age is the Amazon warehouse worker, scrambling to the point of destroying their health to keep up with the robot packing parcels beside them.

Collectively, humans are increasingly experiencing life as servants to “the economy”, working longer and running harder just to stand still. But are we here to serve “the economy”, or should it be serving us? Greens – as they talk about the necessarily post-growth world (for you cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet) – are the only major political current to seriously address this question.

Other political families still expect individuals to locate their identity, status, and place in society through their position in the productive value chain. In this vision, it is difficult to find a place for those who are not engaged in conventional paid work – artists, carers, contemplatives, and those with disabilities, whom the discriminatory job market fails to accommodate. Greens have a different approach. They want to rebalance society, to free people's time to be their own, not directed by a boss (whether human or algorithmic). No one lies on their deathbed and groans, “I wish I had spent more time in the office.”

Unsurprisingly, Greens have been at the forefront of the growing campaign for a four-day working week as standard with no loss of pay – maybe eventually a three-day week, as explored by the [New Economics Foundation](#). More radically, many Greens have championed the universal basic income (UBI), an unconditional payment that allows people to meet their essential needs, to decide for themselves how to spend their time, energy, and talents, acknowledging that they, rather than multinational companies or the state, are best placed to judge that. That is real freedom.

Freedom from corporate reach in our daily life is a second focus of the Green politics of today.⁴ It is an indispensable freedom to rethink our broken food system, dominated at each stage – from seeds to fertilisers and pesticides, harvest machinery, commodity trading, and manufacturing – by corporate greed. The ultra-processed food-like substances that are increasingly penetrating markets around the world are destroying local food systems and sweeping aside food sovereignty, as powerfully charted by the Canadian academic Jennifer Clapp.²

Whether it is standing up against [neonicotinoid pesticides](#) or genetically modified food, championing small farmers and growers, or speaking up for immigrant, often undocumented agricultural workers labouring in awful conditions, Greens are defending the freedom of healthy local food webs against the heavy financial weight of oligopolist multinational companies. They are fighting a similar battle against

the enormously destructive fast fashion system, which has demolished local fabric and clothing production around the world, and against many other forms of manufacturing that have swept aside local artisans.

Ultimately, it is a battle for the freedom to have a diverse, flourishing local economy rather than being trapped in the globalised economic system.

In the streets and the institutions

Green thinking has always regarded neoliberal globalisation as a heavy restriction on freedom, as demonstrated by, among others, the 1999 “Battle of Seattle”. What was notable about those anti-globalisation protests was not just their size and force, but also their creativity and playfulness. As one protagonist, the late David Graeber, later recalled, there was a large “carnival bloc’, replete with clowns, stilt walkers, jugglers, fire-breathers, unicyclists, Radical Cheerleaders, costumed kick lines.” Responding to similarly playful protests in 2004, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair commented that he was not going to be affected by some “travelling anarchist circus”. Understanding the power of creative protest, of facing up to repression not just with force but mockery, has always been central to Green thinking, and it is particularly essential in the age of authoritarian bullies like Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

The broader freedom to protest has also remained at the core of Green ideology since its origins. Non-violent direct action, whether against fracking in England, coal mining in Germany, or deforestation in Poland, and taking to the streets en masse is a crucial part of a democratic society. Speaking up for LGBTQIA+ rallies in Hungary, women’s rights in Poland, or environmental protection in Serbia, Greens are a reliable voice for the right to express dissent against illiberal governments.

Beyond the streets, Green voices also stand up in parliaments and campaigns for the freedom to demand, to imagine, to work for real change. The majority politics of the early 21st century, in the spirit of Francis Fukuyama’s now laughable “end of history” thesis, of the “nudge theory” promoted by now discredited behavioural economics and social psychology, explicitly accepted the current system could not or should not be changed, but only adjusted a little. This was the politics that ultimately produced Brexit and the rise of the far right in many countries. Opposing both the neoliberal consensus and nationalistic rhetoric, Greens demand the vision, the right to change what is clearly a failing system.

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Rights for nature and peoples

In Green thinking, freedom is not just for human animals, but for the more-than-human world too. Drawing on indigenous thinking from around the world, Greens have been at the forefront of the rights for nature movement, driven often at the local level by attempts to establish the legal right of a river or a forest to exist and flourish. On a broader scale, Greens have led efforts to legislate against ecocide and to protect the freedom of ecosystems to flourish. This is not just the right thing to do, but an imperative for human survival: as the Stockholm Resilience Centre identifies, we have exceeded six of the nine planetary boundaries.⁷ There is no freedom on a dead planet.

That effort is intimately related to the essential freedom of our bodies to live uncontaminated by the

microplastics and nano-plastics now found in human breast milk and testicles, by the PFAS (“forever chemicals”) and pesticides in our bodies. These tiny particles restrict the lives of everyone from low-birthweight babies to Alzheimer’s patients. It is not individual action that creates this chronic pollution, but a handful of multinational companies.

Finally, there is the most obvious way in which the Green movement has always been a champion of freedom, demanding the right to self-determination for the people of Tibet, West Papua, Corsica, and many other places. Moreover, Greens are too often the only ones standing up for human rights and the rule of law – some of the most basic freedoms of all – and against torture, false imprisonment, or corporate land grabbing. Too often, violations of such basic rights have been thought of as a problem that only exists in distant lands; today, however, they are closer to home, if not at home.

Self-determination is not just a right of oppressed nations. It is also the freedom to form communities and to govern and choose for ourselves (what is often described as “localism”). The idea that decisions should be made by those who are directly affected by those decisions, and that power should only be referred upwards when absolutely necessary, is foundational to Green thinking.

When it comes to the climate emergency, for example, the world has to decide that it cannot live with runaway heating and set a total greenhouse gas emissions limit. But for a town or village to meet its share of the change, it should be able to decide for itself whether it wants a wind turbine on this or that hill, or solar panels on every house. These decisions cannot be imposed on it by either a far-away capital city or a multinational energy giant.

Green liberation

The political battle Greens currently face is to reclaim their idea of freedom and reinsert it into the broader historical momentum of human emancipation. They need to reframe their message as one of hope, not constraint. In spite of climate and biodiversity urgencies, they have to focus again on politics with a capital “P”: not party politics and elections, but the encompassing vision that gives meaning to both the individual and the collective.

Green liberation is a message of freedom. It offers to change everything so that we can stay who we are. After centuries of learning to be “free from” constraints and building our sense of individuality, we need now to be free together. Indeed, the freedom to be yourself is about becoming aware of a triple reflexivity: oneself, the world, and the planet. Because if infinite material growth is indeed impossible within the physical limits of this planet, there is infinite growth potential in each and every one of us.

We thrive in the links we create and maintain with each other. And this is what Greens can offer to contemporary politics: a vision of humanity that is not reduced to relationships of domination or production; an anthropology that is not reduced to sociological determinism and victimisation; a representation of the world that makes sense of this individual life that none of us ever asked to live, the fruit of a desire that was not our own. In the depths of each of us, stifled by the anguish of living or fulfilled in our projects, there is the aspiration to belong to something greater than ourselves. Deep down, we are beings of connections.

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brutality, aggression, anxiety, and fear.*

Even the self-centred claim to freedom that powers the right-wing populist insurrection is not completely estranged from this feeling. There is, if you read between the lines, the longing for community and the mobilisation against the dissolution of bonds of every kind.

The Greens offer hope. They bring the prospect of a care-ful society, a world where links are nurtured and communities thrive in democracy and solidarity. Often now, such thriving only appears in moments of extremis. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where the US state – that extreme example of neoliberalism – was so useless and uncaring that more than 1300 people lost their lives, there was “an extraordinary flourishing of mutual aid, solidarity, and communal cooperation, something we might call ‘disaster anarchism’”. At its heart was activist Leenie Halbert, who was quoted as saying: “I just wanted to bring love back to my neighborhood.” The challenge is to produce such community action before the point of disaster.

Green liberation is the answer to these dire times of brutality, aggression, anxiety, and fear. It aims to build from the grassroots up and to deliver the Green vision at the national and transnational levels. This is a vision of hope, of human possibility. It is our job now to find a route out of the impasse that neoliberal politics has driven itself into. That does not mean going backwards, but breaking down the walls, physical and mental, built up around us.



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