

Ecology: Today's Battleground

Article by Nicolas Truong

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The climate crisis is spotlighting the divide between reformist environmentalism and more radical ecologies in France. Meanwhile, the far right wants to associate biodiversity protection with the defence of ethnic identity.

Heat-stunned birds falling from the sky in their thousands onto the cracked earth of India and Pakistan. Salmon scorching to death in a river during a heatwave in the United States. A consortium of intergovernmental climate experts warning that humanity has a limited time to “ensure a viable future”. A battered Ukraine that has become the epicentre of a worldwide energy conflict and food crisis. Ecology has become the great question – and struggle – of this century. But decisions over how to respond are beset with conflicts. These are being amplified by the urgency of the planetary crisis.

At their graduation ceremony in April 2002, a group of environmental and life sciences students at AgroParisTech [one of France's *grandes écoles*] issued a [call for “desertion”](#), referring in particular to the agroindustrial sector. Appealing for a “change of direction” and a rejection of the “system” said to be waging a “war on the living world” and farmers, the students urged their peers not to join professions that would make them “design ready meals and then chemotherapy drugs to treat the resulting diseases” or even to “count frogs and butterflies only for them to be legally disappeared under construction sites”. The movement is reminiscent of – but more radical than – the one launched in 2018 by the student manifesto “For an ecological awakening” [*Pour un réveil écologique*]. Philosopher Dominique Bourg believes that this desire to secede is evidence of a “universal ecological affect” strongly felt by young people. According to the results of a worldwide survey on eco-anxiety [published in The Lancet](#) in 2021, 75 per cent of 16- to 25-year-olds consider the future “frightening”, and 56 per cent believe that “humanity is doomed”.

Calls to choose a different path – or “fork away”, as philosopher Bernard Stiegler puts it – are driven by the fact that, in the words of philosopher Michel Serres, “our model of development is a model of destruction” and “the real world war” is “the one that pits our entire species against its own environment”. For Bruno Villalba, political science professor at AgroParisTech and author of the 2022 book *L'Écologie politique en France*, the conflict between “two ecologies” lies at the heart of this debate. First to make this distinction was Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, who formulated the concept of “shallow” and “deep” ecologism in 1973. “Shallow” ecology favours technical solutions to reduce pollution or curb overconsumption without tackling the anthropocentric productivism at their root. By contrast, “deep” ecology strives to associate human and non-human life forms within an ecology-centred metaphysics. An aspect of Næss's thinking on this issue – ecosophy [ecological wisdom] – was later taken up by philosopher and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari.

Government versus autonomy

Many thinkers agree that there is a divide between an ecologism that is “conciliatory” towards productivism and a “radical” ecologism that seeks to break with it. Dominique Bourg sees this as an opposition between “corrective” and “paradigmatic” ecologism, i.e. between an environmentalism that

presupposes an ontological separation between humans and their environment and one that recognises our interdependence with living things. Philosopher Antoine Chopot, co-author with Léna Balaud of *Nous ne sommes pas seuls*, published in 2021, conceives this as the “ecology of government” versus the “ecology of autonomy”.

Of these two forms, the corrective version is clearly dominant. At its root lies “sustainable development”, an idea forged by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, which involves “meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The concept is based on notions such as “transition” (from fossil fuels to renewable energies), “compensation” (such as carbon offsetting), “resilience” (for instance of regions recovering from intensive industrialisation and agriculture), and “sustainability” (which is slowly replacing the term “sustainable development”).

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Corrective ecologism, which seeks to adapt to a world of limited resources, is supported in particular by engineer and lecturer Jean-Marc Jancovici, who proposes “reconciling sobriety and capitalism” (*sobriété* being the Francophone term for reduced consumption) through decarbonisation. While Jancovici states that Emmanuel Macron’s first term in office “did not in any way encourage” what he calls “the inversion of decision-making criteria” – i.e. the change in economic “software” needed for climate action – The Shift Project, a think tank he co-founded, proposed a “Plan for Transforming the French Economy” in early 2022.

In order to transition away from the fossil fuel consumption that has “disrupted” the climate and our dependence on oil – “the lifeblood of globalisation”, the group led by Jancovici proposes that we prioritise hydrogen energy storage, electrify car transport, promote the use of bicycles to transport goods, cut beef consumption by two thirds, end “imported deforestation” (caused by the production of soya, shrimps, or palm oil destined for the European market) through compulsory labelling on all processed products, and reduce air travel in favour of rail. A plan, he insists, that is “neither growthist nor degrowthist”.

But the use of technological solutions – such as nuclear energy, which he calls “the safest [energy solution] for humans and the most environmentally friendly” – continues to divide people. This “conciliatory” ecologism also forms part of the European Green Deal, which, according to diplomat Laurence Tubiana, is “the new social contract” of our time. In the 2022 book *Politiques de l’interrègne*, economist Jean Pisani Ferry underlines that the Green Deal will oblige us to face up to “the macroeconomic shock of climate action”. Economist Eloi Laurent, meanwhile, is not hostile to governmental ecologism, provided that “the ecological transition is not subordinated to economic growth” – a criterion he does not believe is fulfilled by the Green Deal. He proposes going further and “getting out of growth”, following New Zealand’s example in the healthcare sector, to achieve a “social-ecological transition”.

The industrial domination of nature

Disputes also divide the supporters of an ecologism “without transition”, to use a phrase coined by civil disobedience collective Désobéissance Ecolo Paris. Antoine Chopot notes that “an anti-capitalist and Leninist Left seeking to integrate an ecologism that has long remained outside its focus” is accusing others of “blubbering over the living world”, in the words of [radical left-wing] economist Frédéric Lordon.

They see this as a diversion from the unchanging struggle of our time. According to Lordon, “It is capitalism that is destroying the planet, and it is only by destroying capitalism that we will save the planet.” This part of the Left, disoriented by the new ideas of ecosophy, fears that ecology will supplant economy, that nature will dethrone culture, that the love of birds will replace support for the proletariat, and that concern for the wretched land will divert attention from the “Wretched of the Earth”. However, counters Chopot, it is possible to be anti-capitalist precisely “because one is sensitive to the natural world, to the condition of living beings, to their fulfilment, to their points of view, and to their relations with the rest of the Earth’s inhabitants”. It is necessary to not only “politicise wonder”, in the words of philosopher Baptiste Morizot, but also to politicise the emotion and horror provoked by the razing of an ancient beech forest. “Emotions evoked by the destruction of the living world are also gateways to politics, since they can lead us back to the causes of ecological devastation,” says Chopot.

What’s more, there is no guarantee that other aspects of communism or socialism would protect against the ravages of extractivism. As philosopher Serge Audier has emphasised, the history of Western “Promethean hegemony” shows that the revolutionary syndicalists and orthodox Marxists of the last century saw socialism as “the dialectical heir of capitalism”. In other words, “It could be that the Left has been largely ‘hegemonised’ by the imaginaries and practice of industrial capitalism.”

For most Marxists, the industrial domination of nature is rooted in a separatist and artificialist culture similar to that of the liberals, although American philosopher and gender studies theorist Judith Butler believes that the extent to which Marx himself saw labour as an act of domination of nature has been “greatly exaggerated”. Philosopher Pierre Charbonnier further argues that “the cataclysmic transformation of the chemical makeup of the atmosphere, soil, and oceans happening today is not a normal crisis; it is not an ordinary, internal contradiction of capitalism”. This is all the more true because “it is not only capitalism that has accompanied material development, even if it has ousted all other systems. In fact, it is quite conceivable that the triumph of a global communist revolution in the 20th century would have left us with an even worse ‘carbon footprint’ than today, simply because its productive and developmental performance would have been much better.”

The emergence of decolonial ecology

Rosa Luxemburg, a central figure of the Spartacist uprising [a January 1919 armed revolt in Berlin, after which she was brutally murdered], addressed these contradictions in her 1918 Letters from Prison. To a friend, socialist activist Sophie Liebknecht, she wrote, “Do you know that I often have the impression that I am not really a human being, but rather a bird or some other animal that has taken on human form. Deep down, I feel much more at home in a piece of garden, like here, or in the countryside, lying in the grass among the bumblebees, than at a party congress.” Not that this implied deserting the proletariat cause: “You, I can tell,” she continued, “knowing you won’t suspect me of betraying socialism. You know that I hope to die in the struggle, in a street battle or a penitentiary. [...] But in my heart of hearts, I am closer to my coal tits than to the ‘comrades’.” It was a matter of sensibility, not sentimentality. Of humanity, not blubbing.

Long before biologist Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* revealed the extent of the damage, especially to health, caused by pesticides in the United States, Rosa Luxemburg devoured books on the natural sciences, botany, and zoology. She understood that songbirds were disappearing from Germany “due to the spread of rational cultivation – forestry, horticulture, agriculture – which gradually destroys the places where they feed and nest: hollow trees, wasteland, scrub, fallen leaves on the ground. I read this with great sadness”. Her grief was not anthropocentric: “I didn’t so much think about the birdsong and what it means for humans, but I couldn’t hold back my tears at the thought of the silent, irreversible

disappearance of these small, defenceless creatures.” Her compassion extended to all species and to humans too. Remembering a Russian book she once read on the disappearance of the Native Americans in North America, she laments that “they too are gradually being driven out of their territory [...] and are condemned to a silent and cruel death”. Without turning these letters into a treatise on ecopolitical emancipation, we can see that Rosa Luxemburg drew a connection between different types of domination.

Part of the right believes that ecologism is intrinsically conservative – since it aims to “conserve” the biosphere.

For everything is linked in our intertwined world. In recent years this has spurred the development of a decolonial ecologism critical of a “green colonialism”, which is centred on the plantation and has been in place since the beginning of colonisation. This was analysed by environmental engineer Malcolm Ferdinand in his 2019 book *Une écologie décoloniale*, using the concept of the “Plantationocene” as proposed by anthropologist Anna Tsing and philosopher Donna Haraway. Similar ideas have engendered ecofeminisms, occasionally criticised for their “forms of essentialism” that “[associate] women with nature” – to which some feminists who can be considered ecologists, such as Judith Butler, refuse to subscribe.

Getting hunters and vegans around the table

An attempt is underway to overcome the traditional tensions between ecological anti-capitalism and the new environmental humanities, in the same way that the intellectual and political Left is trying to move away from the tired opposition between the “social” and the “societal”. This move is perceptible on the theoretical level, as illustrated by philosopher Paul Guillibert, whose 2021 book *Terre et Capital: Pour un communisme du vivant* sets out to “put the living world back at the heart of a communist politics”, assuming communism is capable of “re-founding its cosmology within a renewed naturalism”. A “communism of the living world” is seen as present wherever “attempts are made to suspend the exploitation of nature and labour in the name of a harmonious use of the Earth”. Examples include the Notre-Dame-des-Landes anti-airport movement in France and the coalition created by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in the US to oppose an oil pipeline project that threatens their water resources.

Efforts are being made to reconcile the divide between sociocentric and naturalist visions of ecologism, for instance between small-scale farming and buying land – whether as associations or individuals – in order to return it to nature. The *Reprise de terres* collective has looked into the conflicts arising between using land and protecting it and has demonstrated that it is indeed possible to combine small-scale livestock farming and wildlife, the production of good quality food, and rewilding.

But this quest to green the world through land policy cannot be reduced to the communalism of France’s ZADs (“*Zones à défendre*”) or rewilded archipelagos. In the manner of [former French prime minister] Léon Blum who, in 1920, spoke of wanting to “keep the old house” of the French Section of the Workers’ International in the face of the communist split, philosopher Bruno Latour believes that “an ecological front cannot be opened without a culture of compromise, that is to say, without social democracy.” Indeed, the ambition to “maintain the habitability of the planet” requires new “geo-social alliances” and must push “hunters and vegans, capitalist entrepreneurs and ZADist anarchists into dialogue”. The conflicts between Left and Right, he argues, were built around questions of production, and continue

today over questions of habitability.

There is also a part of the Right that believes that ecologism is intrinsically conservative – since it aims to “conserve” the biosphere – and a far-right section of the ecologist movement that bases its reactionary ideology on the preservation of the Earth. “By insisting that ecologism is left-wing, as some activists do, we have forgotten that political ecologism also has right-wing roots, and by sidelining far-right thinking, we have forgotten the effects of contagion and replication,” notes political scientist and expert on radical right-wing movements Stéphane François.

The eco-republican path

“Protecting the environment is obviously the calling of conservatism, which is nothing other than the defence of the home,” said British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, referring to the etymology of the word “ecology”. Coined from the Greek oikos (“house”, “habitat”) and logos (“discourse”, “reason”), this science of habitat and home was founded in 1866 by German biologist Ernst Haeckel. The ambivalence of the term, which refers to both the study of natural ecosystems and the campaign against their destruction, means that ecologism can oscillate between progressivism and conservatism. According to Stéphane François, it can also “tip over to a reactionary, counter-revolutionary, and anti-Enlightenment anti-modernism”, which the rise of the radical right has “confirmed and accentuated” in recent years.

The far right’s “organicist” conception of the community leads it to want to preserve the particularities of ethnocultural groups from the “ideology of sameness”. Alain de Benoist, the French theorist of the New Right, developed the concept of “ethno-differentialism”, which seeks to protect peoples and the diversity of cultures from what he calls “a general system of global homogenisation”. This, in turn, is based on what Hervé Juvin – columnist and ecology expert of the [far right] Rassemblement National – calls the “ecologism of civilisations”.

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Adherents of this [French] conservative revolution are intent on resisting a globalisation that would destroy this ethnic diversity. “Far-right ecologism is fundamentally an ecologism of populations,” writes Stéphane François. It is also based on localism, [certain strands of] neopaganism, and anti-universalism. A further element – albeit perhaps less so than in the past – is a certain conception of “integral ecologism”, which opposes GMOs and medically-assisted reproduction on the grounds of resisting the artificialisation of life. Philosopher Pierre Madelin notes that ethno-differentialism has progressively been coupled with what could be called “eco-differentialism”, i.e. a “green anti-immigrationism” that seeks to enmesh ecology and immigration. Marine Le Pen, he reminds us, has argued for the protection of “ecosystems, starting with the human ecosystems that are nations”, and Hervé Juvin claims that humankind must “defend its biotope” against “invasive species”. “The far right will only gain power if it can persuasively link the rejection of immigration to concern for the environment,” Madelin states. Indeed, identity-based terrorism has already radicalised this linkage.

“I consider myself an ecofascist,” wrote Brenton Tarrant, who in 2019 murdered fifty-one people and injured forty at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Immigration and global warming are “two

sides of the same coin”, he wrote in an online manifesto. “The environment is being destroyed by overpopulation, and we Europeans are the only ones not contributing to overpopulation. [...] We must kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation, and in so doing save the environment.” Ecofascism is a very real threat. “Porosity” between progressive and conservative versions of ecologism “does exist”, insists Stéphane François, notably around “the defence of a pre-industrial and rooted way of life”. Pierre Madelin, however, cautions that “it is futile to essentialise this convergence between different ecologisms. It is not because the far right today claims to be democratic that democracy itself is far right”.

So how many divisions can be found within ecologism? As many as there are ways of greening politics and politicising ecology. Among the attempts to resolve these conflicts, Serge Audier’s “eco-republicanism”, set out in his 2020 book *La cité écologique*, is an original and little-trodden path. Supported by a new political philosophy designed to confront the climate challenge, it presents itself as a form of civic republicanism capable of “overcoming its dogmatic anthropocentrism”. This eco-republicanism “will be cosmo-political or will not be”, and is in any case far removed from nationalism, because “political ecology in one country makes even less sense than socialism in one country”. But many prefer to politicise ecologism on the basis of “habitability” and “the condition of the Earth”. In any case, Audier sees it as “important that ecologism becomes the focus of controversy and political confrontation on the very meaning of society today and in the future”. Indeed, there is no shortage of controversy. On the battlefields of ideas and ideals made reality, these debates are inventing a new politics of nature.

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