

Free Together

Article by Adam Ostolski, Edouard Gaudot, Jamie Kendrick

July 4, 2024

Can ecology unify societies divided by politics serving the individual? Edouard Gaudot, author of *The Seven Pillars of the City*, and Adam Ostolski discuss societal disaffection, perceptions of nature, economics, religion, and spirituality.

Jamie Kendrick: *Les Sept Piliers de la Cité* (The Seven Pillars of the City) begins with the sense that beliefs are crumbling and we are lacking a deeper sense of meaning. Why do you take the crisis often discussed in economic, democratic, or environmental terms to a deeper, almost spiritual dimension?

Edouard Gaudot: We all encounter a crisis at some point in our lives, which opens questions and the need to rebuild oneself. This individual journey is something that I think societies go through too. Today, strong signs exist that the world has lost its meaning for an increasing number of people, making it very difficult to build anything collective.

Shared beliefs are crumbling. Some have been destroyed. The loss of meaning in democratic societies is the crux of the crisis for me and I see three possibilities before us. First, we can rebuild the beliefs we had: the revival option. Second, we can abandon shared meaning – but nihilism is not a good recipe for a shared society. The third option is to change the framework in which we do politics. That is what I am calling for.

Adam Ostolski: My reading of the book is the exact opposite. What I find most inspiring is that your writing invites us to look beyond this overwhelming sense of crisis and pay more attention to what we already have. First, we are alive, which we easily take for granted. We are alive, we share the world. And, like it or not, we share many spaces in the world. We have friends and things that we care for. And we can change and not be stuck in our beliefs. We may doubt and be disenchanted with dysfunctional institutions, but there is huge potential in this. Even in the rubble, small plants will take root and prepare the ecosystem for new species. I found your book to be an opening, looking for the creative potential in the current predicament, painful as it is.

We need a politics for the collective, of course, but it cannot ignore how the collective relates to the self.

Edouard Gaudot: It is the lesson of *Star Wars*: every time you think that darkness has won, there is a burst of light. Every time you think that good has triumphed over evil, there is a little bit of evil that is starting to grow in the shadows.

Deconstruction – in other words, the crisis that we are in – was necessary so that we could completely go individually and collectively to the end of this experience and take stock of what we are, where we are, and who we are. This is a journey that is as necessary for the individual as it is for the collective.

We can talk about our predicament in societal terms, that we have lost ourselves in consumerism, nationalism, and growth. But we can also talk about it in personal terms, about cutting ourselves off, and recoiling to our family and friends. This can be incredibly enriching but cannot be the basis for a collective project. This articulation of the self is something that I find missing in all political thought today. We need a politics for the collective, of course, but it cannot ignore how the collective relates to the self.

The book is not a seven-point programme or manifesto. What do you mean by the seven pillars?

Edouard Gaudot: Indeed, programmes are for computers, not politics. The seven pillars attempt to redefine the intellectual, political, and spiritual framework in which we do politics. We need to change three things: the political relationship we entertain for ourselves; the political relationship we entertain for others; and the political relationship we entertain for the planet. The seven pillars attempt to do just that.

Pillars one and two are *sine qua non* conditions but not sufficient in themselves. The first makes everything that is alive inalienable – the inalienability of the living. We need to change the way we see the world and the way we approach every living entity – not just humans but also animals, plants, rivers – to move towards an understanding of the biosphere. The second, drawn from the same principle, requires changing the way we see property. We argue over property like two fleas arguing over who owns the dog. And yet, we should really belong to the earth, not the opposite. And, as the *Little Prince* would argue, we should be useful to what we own, not just make it useful to us.

Once we have changed those two perspectives, then we can get to the core business of changing politics, which are the third, fourth, and fifth pillars of the book. Pillar three is about changing economics. Today, we find ourselves feeding a machine that has nothing to do with us. You can call it capitalism, neoliberalism, or consumerism – it doesn't matter. We are dealing with a machine that takes over our lives and does not serve us – we serve it. So, we need an economy that is alive: not just a circular economy or degrowth but a more substantial change in how we produce everything from food to waste, and back again.

Next comes changing our relationship with others. The political regime of alterity is democracy – there is no other. It means that we need not only find ourselves in equal freedom, equal dignity, and self-acknowledgement but also learn to be “free-with” rather than “free-from”. We need to change “free-from” into a way to be “free together”. Here I'm reappropriating the words of Carl Schmitt, happily changing the “friend-enemy” cleavage. Instead of trying to negate this polarity or always trying to emphasise the enemy, we need to emphasise the friend instead.

Pillar five is about changing our political relationship, not just with others or the planet but also with ourselves. I see ecology as a spiritual path. Ecology is not just a science, nor is it just about politics. It is also about changing the way one sees the world and oneself, being part of something bigger. Opening up to ecology can be comparable to a religious or spiritual initiation. You have an epiphany and start developing in knowledge, experiencing complexity. At some point, you reach an understanding of the world as a whole, not as something separate, where science and consciousness come together.

With a different economy, a different democracy, and a new relationship to ourselves in the world, we arrive at the last two pillars: six being anarchist government and, seven, planetary consciousness. By anarchist government, I mean ways of organising institutions that change our relationship to power from pyramid-vertical organisations towards something much more horizontal. By anarchist, I do not mean that there should be no institutions but rather order without power that is not limited to one city or place. I

finish with planetary consciousness, where, following Bruno Latour's lead, I land in Europe, seeing the European spirit as a blueprint for reconciliation that changes the way we relate to each other based on law and cooperation rather than strength.

Adam Ostolski: The biggest strength, and a small weakness, of your approach is this focus on spirituality. Spirituality, of course, can exist without religion. But it is not sustainable because it does not produce tradition. When it does produce communities, they tend towards being sectarian.

Since the beginning of religion, there has been a tension between religion as an institution, forming a community of people, and spirituality. Spirituality can exist without religion in an individual but then does not have political impact. If we look at religion, we can also speak of heresy and orthodoxy, and the relationship between the two. Both depend on a community of people who share some beliefs but struggle over the meanings of the beliefs that they share.

Now, to move closer to political questions, we live in a world of many religions, which is a very positive thing. We do not want this to change. Most people, when they discover some form of spirituality, they do so through the lenses of their diverse traditions. If you want to translate this spiritual vision into something slightly more practical, without being offensive, then we need to think about how to engage with and organise political thinking about religion in a way that moves us forward.

I was once at a big sociological conference in Poland with a session on alternative lifestyles. One of the speakers, researcher Justyna Kajta, had studied far-right activists from Poland and carried out biographical research on young men. The sociologist found that these far-right subjects commonly preferred a useful life to a happy life. And I thought: "Wow, I can see myself in this. I do not follow their political ideas, but my life is about something more than myself too." We need spirituality, not only to discover and master the self but also to transcend the self. It is also why we need organised traditional religions, with a different arrangement in political and public spheres.

Edouard Gaudot: If you look at it historically, radical right movements are somehow trying to bring a spiritual value back into a world of materialism. My reading of *Fight Club*, for instance, is that it is a fascist book and movie. But it is not the violence nor the paramilitary organisation committing sabotage that makes it fascist. The main character, Tyler Durden, gives young men a sense of overcoming their limitations and overcoming a life defined by consumerism and a lack of courage. The message is deeply fascist *and* strongly spiritual.

The far right appeals to the same longing for something larger than oneself. The only other political reflection that appeals to that same yearning is ecology. This commonality is why I think the 21st century will be a standoff between ecology, which goes beyond Green parties, and the far right. The bright and dark sides of this century are the green view of the world against the fascist view of the world.

Isn't there a risk that an emphasis on the self and spirituality functions as a form of retreat? That after a failure to change the world, we sit under a tree and seek to change ourselves first? Is it not through the push for utopia – through politics that can change the world – that we also change ourselves?

Edouard Gaudot: It's not "the self first", it's "the self also". We should not confuse utopia and idealism. Ideals, even unreachable ones, are part of both politics and personal development. It is the struggle to achieve something – be it mastering a sport or learning a language – that changes you and that is the important part, not the utopia at the end.

I fully agree that self-transformation, when not articulated to a collective project, is nice, but it's just self-development. And, in all honesty, it is not that useful to the world. At the same time, political projects must never neglect the individual. To take care of others, we need to be well in ourselves. Someone who doesn't look after themselves is in no place to help anyone. It is like the emergency protocol on a plane: adjust your mask first before helping others.

So, yes, self-development has to be articulated as something bigger. Historically, any collective project that has not empowered individuals has turned out to be extremely bad, mostly totalitarian. We do not want a collection of individuals that does not care about society and we do not want a society that believes it knows what is the best for everyone.

Adam Ostolski: For me, the starting point to care for ourselves is to take notice of others and to meet them halfway. The transformation of the self does not necessarily come from within but from the challenges posed by other people whom we may like, dislike, work with, need, desire, or whatever.

The same is true of our collective self as a society. There is a great passage on *laïcité* in the book where you explain how the notion in France has become a tool for collective self-reinforcement rather than openness (the original idea behind the concept). Macron epitomes this. In his speeches on Islamic separatism from recent years, we can see how political elites in France have attempted to solve issues linked to social security, the economy, and foreign affairs by legislating religion, which is an ironic twist in a country that regards itself as unimpeachably secular.

The French dilemma reveals part of the problem we face across Western democracies. We are preoccupied with questions of who we truly are, what is the correct name for me, how can I reclaim this name from the world, and what is the correct name for the Other. Can 'they' be called by this national name, this gendered name, or this other label?

This question has its roots in Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These preoccupations about the true self – both in individual and collective terms – and about what others can legitimately be called are at the centre of political struggles both on the Left and the Right. Monotheistic religions, especially those encouraging spirituality, are very necessary and helpful for building a democratic public space. I also think that we need the influence of non-Abrahamic traditions as relief from this preoccupation with identity.

The book describes three principles to guide politics today: first, preserving, defending, and restoring natural equilibriums and living conditions; second, expanding freedom, unless it contradicts the first principle; and finally, expanding material wellbeing, unless it contradicts the first or the second principle. But humans have already upturned “the natural order of things” quite fundamentally in so many ways. Don't we need to accept our agency rather than trying to preserve and restore natural equilibrium?

Edouard Gaudot: I'm not sure. Some of our greatest successes come when we manage our withdrawal from nature, like marine reserves or some national parks, for example, leaving the wild to rebuild its equilibrium. Sometimes, the best agency we can have over restoring nature – at the heart of the Nature Restoration Law being fought over in our European institutions – is indeed to leave some places alone. It doesn't mean that we need to leave the world, as the deep ecology creed would argue. We are part of this creation and its equilibrium. But we need to learn how to not upset natural balances, and how to respect and nurture them.

We, human beings, are organisms that are, in effect, organisations of different balances. The challenge

today is that of re-inserting ourselves into the world, so we can nurture it as organisms and not operate it as an all-consuming mechanism. This will require “agency”, because retreating will not be enough. We will need to reform ourselves. This is why I think ecology is a kind of spirituality.

The challenge today is that of re-inserting ourselves into the world, so we can nurture it as organisms and not operate it as an all-consuming mechanism.

So, there is room for human action: through withdrawal wherever we can, but also through reformation, wherever and whenever we can – though not if human action means going down the road of geoengineering and terraforming the Earth.

Adam Ostolski: Humans are also part of the ecosystem. We should not, for example, think of withdrawing from territories where the natural equilibrium depends on humans. Where humans neglect to control burn forests, for example, the result is often megafires.

When we release our grip over nature, we also relax the grip that ecological challenges currently hold on society. When we see how much we can achieve, sometimes, by just letting trees grow and seas develop as they are, we won't need to spend so much time thinking about how to make everyone vegan and stop them from flying. It would release the grip on our lifestyles and the burden on us as individuals and communities.

Of course, we need to reform our lifestyles, but we can do this more organically if it is not the only solution. Mechanisms can be fixed but organisms heal. We need to fix those things that we can first, and leave both human communities and natural ecosystems the space they need to heal.

What would you like someone to draw from this book?

Adam Ostolski: We often use political labels as slurs. But I think we should not. Conservatism is a very noble political tradition with great insight into humans and societies, but it also has a dark side. Liberalism, socialism, feminism, and environmentalism all have great insights into humans and societies and represent wonderful visions for the common life in a polity, but they all also have their dark sides.

The ecological imagination can inform how we think about democracy. The ecological thinking of democracy will not be how to improve others, fix them, make them think the way we think, and impose one correct solution on everyone. It will be thinking about how to include all those different voices in ways that are not harmful to others. It will be challenging, because of the dark side that every political ideology has. But it can be a way to build a common world.

The starting point is not what is the law, what is the truth, or what is the correct solution. The first question will be how to share this word, this polity, this European Union, this city, with people who are different from me. Finding the balance, of course, will not mean always being stable, as opposed to some economic models. In nature, equilibrium is always dynamic and changing.

That is the lesson of this book. We can learn a lot from conservatives, liberals, or whatever tradition, without losing ourselves. This gives us an option for building a world that we can inhabit together. It is the essence of ecology for me in politics.

Edouard Gaudot: I would like a reader to leave with introspection. I think we should always raise doubts and instruct our introspection. Whereas the dark side of all worldviews leads us back to dogmatism, introspection implies the will to better oneself – not just to perform better but to be a better living being. Introspection means different things to different people: going to mass, meditation, humanitarian work, be my guest. It is no accident that one of the most powerful lessons of Western philosophy is still relevant: “Know thyself”.



Adam Ostolski is a sociologist, columnist, and activist. He works at the University of Warsaw and is a member of *Krytyka Polityczna*. He was co-editor-in-chief of the *Zielone Wiadomości* from 2009 to 2013 and co-chair of the Polish Green Party from 2013 to 2016.



Edouard Gaudot is a historian and political scientist. He has worked at the College of Europe in Warsaw and in the European Parliament. He is a teacher, consultant, and writer. His latest book is *Les 7 Piliers de la Cité* (Plon, 2022).



Jamie Kendrick is political advisor on European affairs at the European Green Party (EGP). He was formerly editor-in-chief of the *Green European Journal*.

Published July 4, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/free-together/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.