

THE GERMAN GREENS



A Social and Political Profile
WERNER HÜLSBERG

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Translated from the German by Gus Fagan



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1

Ecology and Politics

*Where many a poison factory blooms
beneath a yellow sky
where rivers flow as black as night
where we all slowly die . . .
you have stolen our jungles
and polluted our sky
the swollen river stinks as it flows by
we are the rats
we live in your shadow
you giant brutes, you killer vampires
cannibals, blood-sucking, killer vampires
where many a poison factory blooms
beneath a yellow sky
there the wind will turn and howl
and the acid rain will fall*
Udo Lindenberg, 'The Rats'

The capitalist world order has been in crisis since the end of the 1960s. The driving forces of the long post-war boom have fizzled out.¹ This is true also of the Federal Republic of Germany, where the special factors operating after the war are no longer economically relevant. More and more the image of Germany is becoming one of unemployment, spectacular bankruptcies, the collapse of smaller banks, crises in the state economy, growing corruption and the restriction of democratic rights.² The first response to the signs of crisis was a massive upswing in the labour movement, both politically and organizationally. The spell had been broken and the Federal Republic was to witness a

growth in the strength of the trade unions, an increase in the number of strikes, a growing influence of the traditional organizations of the labour movement and a substantial strengthening of different revolutionary organizations resulting in particular from the youth radicalization.

Everything went like clockwork. There was the Meadows Report, *The Limits of Growth*,³ and Sico Mansholt's *Europe and the Limits of Growth*.⁴ We had to smile, for there it was in black and white: capitalism was a crime against humanity; it produced only for the sake of production; its goal was growth and in order to achieve this growth it left corpses in its wake, destroyed our planet, blindly wasted our unrenewable resources, interfered with our basic needs (air, shelter, quiet and leisure) and forced upon us nicely packaged but useless consumer articles as a substitute for the one-time freely available gifts of nature. And all the while it was leading us to catastrophe, a catastrophe which threatened to extinguish all higher life-forms on this planet. It was socialism or barbarism.

But there was no joy here for the Marxist left. The participation of Marxists in the ecological discussion, to the extent that it took place at all, was very short-lived and defensive. Marxists failed to recognize the scope and the social importance of the ecological debate.⁵ The ecological problem, like a whole series of other important questions, was simply 'stuck on' to the old programme, and this was indeed the cynical view that many held in the early 1970s. Although it might seem, at first glance, that there was at this time a great interest in the ecological question, it must be said that the standpoint was a purely defensive one and that it was the result, in any case, of the pressure of the real ecological movement. This purely additive approach to the ecological question is incapable of dealing seriously with the real dimensions of this problem, of its social and strategic consequences. Even today, among leading figures on the left, this is still the case.⁶

The concept of ecological crisis is a comprehensive one, pointing to the action of the human species on its external environment as well as to the threats and dangers which are a consequence of this action. Like modern military technology, the ecological crisis threatens the survival of the human species. The set of economic relations and the myth of the modern industrial system, the system which, by means of 'occidental rationalization' (Weber), constantly drives forward the process of 'demystifying' reality in order to control nature, has led to a

growing gulf between human action and human knowledge, between escalating progress and knowledge of the consequences of this progress. This now threatens the existence of the human species as has been clearly demonstrated in the cases of Chernobyl, Bhopal and in the numerous instances where rivers and whole regions have been polluted and poisoned.

An adequate account of the extent of this ecological crisis would be beyond the scope of the present work. It would have to deal with the poisoning of the air, water and earth; the destruction of the forests; the deterioration of agricultural land; hunger in the Third World; poison chemicals in the household, in food and in the production process; the new technologies; the dangers of nuclear power and nuclear waste. But in order to see just how serious this problem is, let us take just one example briefly: the problem of air pollution.

The pollution of the air results from nitrogen oxide (37 million tonnes in OECD countries in 1980), sulphur dioxide (3.1 million tonnes annually in West Germany), artificial fibres, the highly poisonous chlorinated carbons which are a special problem in inner cities, heavy metals (2 million tonnes of lead emitted annually into the air), hydrocarbons, and so on. The results of all this, within the next five hundred years, will be large-scale climatic change (higher temperature, changed rain pattern, melting of the polar ice-cap); drastic changes in the availability of fish, forests and fresh water; the destruction of the protective ozone layer in the atmosphere with its consequent threat to DNA, the building block of human life; acid rain, which will destroy the forests and affect the water supply; the destruction of many living species resulting from the higher levels of poison on the earth's surface and in the water system. The threats to health are already clear today: carbon monoxide damages the heart and circulatory system; sulphur dioxide damages the lungs; sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide are the principal causes of bronchitis and asthma; poisonous heavy metals are a cause of anaemia and nervous illnesses; poisonous artificial fibres, for instance, asbestos, are causes of cancer.⁷

At the beginning of the 1970s we refused to recognize the true dimensions of the ecological problem and this problem was not given its proper place in our considerations of programme, strategy and tactics. We were quite happy to rely on the work of bourgeois ecological experts such as Barry Commoner who, in his book, *The Closing Circle* (1971), had already accounted for the increase in environmental pollution in terms of changes in

production techniques dictated by economic interests (higher productivity, greater profit) and had rejected any explanation based on growth in world population or too high per capita income. Barry Commoner's criticisms of the *Club of Rome Report* are sound:

The method used was to collect data on the historical trends of different parameters that played a role in the environmental crisis, project these curves mathematically and then have them interact in the computer. The manner in which different parameters are allowed to interact is, in fact, the real substance of computer programmes. It is decisive, therefore, which interaction mechanisms are designed for the computer programme. The types of interaction eventually opted for completely excluded two areas – the economic and social.⁸

Since this theme had been effectively dealt with, even by irreproachable bourgeois experts, the only task remaining was to rescue the honour of Marxism against any bourgeois errors and to argue about the calculation methods of the bourgeois ecologists. It wasn't difficult to find plenty of relevant material in Marx's works. After all, in the fifteenth chapter of *Capital* Volume 1, hadn't Marx written: 'Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.'⁹ In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*¹⁰ Engels had dealt extensively with the link between capitalist accumulation, poverty and the destruction of the environment. In *The Dialectics of Nature* Engels had written:

In short, the animal merely uses external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by his presence; man, by his changes, makes it serve his ends, masters it. . . . Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of this human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us. Each of them, it is true, has in the first place the consequences which we counted on, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first.¹¹

The myth was thereby laid to rest according to which Marx had been an admirer of technology and had seen it as 'the foundation of the present and the motor force of the

future'.¹² Unfortunately, the really important questions remained unanswered.

The first question concerns the fundamental optimism which is to be found in the work of Marx and Engels according to which 'mankind sets for itself only those tasks which it is capable of solving'. This is the origin of the patently false assumption that capitalism has an inner tendency to recycle more and more material and therefore to create less and less waste. Marx wrote:

We refer to the reconversion of the excretions of production, the so-called waste, into new elements of production, either of the same, or of some other line of industry; to the processes by which this so-called excretion is thrown back into the cycle of production and, consequently, consumption, whether productive or individual. This line of savings, which we shall later examine more closely, is likewise the result of large-scale social labour. It is the attendant abundance of this waste which renders its available for commerce and thereby turns it into new elements of production.¹³

Dioxin, mountains of rubbish and whole areas poisoned by toxic waste are an empirical refutation of this assumption of Marx.

The second question is this: is not the attitude of the modern labour movement to the relationship between mankind and nature merely a parody of the dialectical understanding of this relationship developed by Marx and Engels? For instance, the reformist labour movement in Germany, already in the 1920s, placed its hopes in a process of automation which would lead to a massive increase in productive forces and provide a basis from which economic democracy would blossom. This attitude was also to be found in the revolutionary workers' movement as a result of the leading role of the Russian Marxists and the pressure of underdevelopment on the first workers' state. How else can we explain the fact that even an astute Marxist like Trotsky could express such absolute confidence in technology and have such a one-sided conception of the relationship between mankind and nature? Trotsky wrote: 'The proper goal of communism is the domination of nature by technology, and the domination of technology by planning so that the raw materials of nature will yield up to mankind all that it needs and more besides.'¹⁴ It was for this reason also that a journal such as *Urania*, which started up at the end of the 1920s in Germany, which counted among its contributors Ernst Bloch, Karl Kautsky, Julian Marcuse and Upton Sinclair, and which, for the first time,

dealt with ecological questions from a socialist standpoint, was the only journal of its kind.¹⁵ *Urania* led a shadow existence for some time and eventually disappeared.

There is also a third question. The quotation from Engels, cited above, continues: 'In particular, after the mighty advances of natural science in the present century, we are more and more getting to know, and hence to control, even the more remote natural consequences at least of our more ordinary productive activities.'¹⁶ The eco-socialists Thomas Ebermann and Rainer Trampert have pointed out that the optimistic assumption of Engels, that we are in a process of developing a better understanding of the consequences of productive activity, is quite simply false.

The creation of an enormous number of new chemical products, the effects of which are not clearly understood, has meant that the application of those products is far ahead of our scientific understanding of their consequences.... More than nine million chemicals have been synthetically created up to now and every day 900 to 1,000 new ones are added to the list. The effects of those are largely unknown.

The need to come to terms with the ecological challenge was dramatized on the night of 26 April 1986 when the reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine exploded and caught fire, sending highly radioactive particles over half the globe and confirming, in a tragic manner, the fears and warnings of the ecology movement expressed after the nuclear accident in Harrisburg in 1978. The effects of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl, especially in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries and regions, is still unknown in spite of Gorbachev's much-heralded *glasnost*. The high level of radiation over hundreds of kilometres that lasted for two months after the accident; the possibility that many young children exposed to the radiation may die of cancer before their parents; the banal assurances of the officials that the damage to drinking water between Kiev and Hamburg will have improved by 50 per cent in thirty years – all of this, in addition to the constant threat of destruction of humanity by nuclear war, should be more than enough to make us take seriously the threat to human life posed by the automatic development of the production process, quite independently of whether it is directed by the market or the central plan. All these signs of 'overheating' in modern capitalist production were ignored by the different Marxist currents or, at best, resulted in the addition of a few decora-

tive ecological frills to the traditional immutable principles.

What is at issue here is not the Marxist materialist method for the scientific understanding of social contradictions and social change. In his theoretical endeavour Marx concentrated first and foremost on the development of exchange value. He analysed why, in capitalist society, this central element was so difficult to comprehend (commodity fetishism, alienation, the trinitarian formula) and he discovered the laws of motion of the capitalist production process. Marx's assertion that humanity poses for itself only those problems which it is capable of solving must itself be interpreted in a historically materialist way. The posing of the problem must precede its solution, and both are historically conditioned. In other words, relationships can be conceived only when they have become part of social reality, as Marx himself demonstrated in the case of Aristotle who, in an epoch of underdeveloped commodity production, sought in vain to understand the character of exchange value. It is understandable why Marx himself did not deal with the material side of production, the use value, why he didn't develop a critique of this aspect of production based on a historical materialist ethic. It is also understandable that in the 1960s, after those 'decades in the dark tunnel' (Deutscher), the left didn't give sufficient analytic attention to those new problems. But it is incomprehensible that today those new questions (among them the question of women's emancipation) are still treated with ignorance by the left only because they put a question mark over the tactical and strategic conceptions developed in accordance with the model of the October Revolution. The capitalist character of the use-value or consumption side of production has developed to an extent today where we can begin to understand its effect and its significance and it is the task of modern Marxists, with a historical-ecological materialist method, to begin to develop solutions to those problems.

The principal currents of the labour movement, the Social Democrats, the Stalinists, and the various revolutionary currents, were prisoners of this 'belief in progress', this blinkered construction of the nineteenth century which set up an opposition between man and nature in order that man could then struggle against and rule over nature. The Stalinists canonized this view with their concept of the 'scientific technological revolution'. The Social Democrats, of course, swore their belief in progress and the small revolutionary groups never ventured outside this consensus.

There was one exception to this and that was the independent current of thought known as Western Marxism and identified with the names of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. The original break between man and nature, with its consequent drive for the former to dominate, would not necessarily lead, in the view of those independent Marxists, to an advance of human emancipation, because the domination over nature was bound up with the consolidation of the class system and served not only the oppression of the social majority by a social order which became to them a 'second nature' but also the strengthening of the apparatus of repression.¹⁷ For Adorno and Horkheimer the goal of a liberated society would not be domination over but reconciliation with nature:

There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no one shall go hungry any more. Every other seeks to apply to a condition that ought to be determined by human needs, a mode of human conduct adapted to production as an end in itself.... The concept of unfettered activity, of uninterrupted procreation, of chubby insatiability, of freedom as frantic bustle, feeds on the bourgeois concept of nature that has always served solely to proclaim social violence as unchangeable, as a piece of healthy eternity ... a society rid of its fetters might take thought that even the forces of production are not the deepest substratum of man, but represent his historical form adapted to the production of commodities. Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars.¹⁸

In this approach, however, the Frankfurt School was not thinking so much of the ecological question. Its primary concern was Fascism and the New Deal and the attempt to demonstrate the link between the scientific conquest of nature, the narrowing of social rationality and the anonymity of power relations.¹⁹ Their approach was a reactive one, as had been that of Benjamin, Lukacs and Bloch at the turn of the century and at the time of the First World War, an approach 'in which nostalgia for the past nurtured utopian thinking, in which the goal was not a return to pre-capitalist society but rather a diversionary route via the past to a new world of the future'.²⁰ However, whereas the 'revolutionary romantic current' (Löwy) were building bridges to socialist and Marxist ideas, the Frankfurt School was attempting to revive the Marxist tradition against the 'Social Democratic personality ideal of full-bearded naturalists' (Adorno). For con-

crete historical reasons, however, Western Marxism had no mass appeal and its coded language was a sign of its distance from both the real labour movement and the revolutionary groups who were trying to develop an effective social praxis. These ideas, which could have led to a critical debate with the concept of nature in the Marxist tradition, were to have no effect.²¹

The ecological debate which began in the early 1970s provided an opportunity to extend Marxist theory and practice, to bring it up to date (which was also, of course, a necessity). But this didn't happen, neither in the Federal Republic nor in the rest of the world. For a precondition of such an extension would have been an active participation in the ecological movement, without blinkers and without preconceptions. But in *Kursbuch*,²² the principal magazine of the West German left and a magazine which one could not normally accuse of being afraid of new ideas, we find the following opinions expressed in 1973: 'Political ecology suffers from a futurological deformation.... The more important are its conclusions, the less reliable they are.'²³ Ecology has become a political issue because 'the residential areas and the living conditions of the bourgeoisie are threatened by environmental pollution'²⁴ There was even a danger of eco-fascism because 'the ecological protest movement, at least in Western Europe, almost always addressed its demands to the state'.²⁵ Finally, 'the problematization of industrial growth only provided a boost to a new growth industry'.²⁶ The conclusion of Hans Magnus Enzensberger was:

It is no surprise that the European left has not become part of the ecological movement. The left has taken part of the environmental discussion into its repertoire of anti-capitalist agitation but remains sceptical of the underlying ecological assumptions and has avoided forming any alliances with purely ecologically oriented groups.²⁷

Thus ended any possibility for the Marxist left to influence the ecological movement. The left had been unable to recognize that 'even if the underlying assumptions of the ecologists turn out to be only partially true, then the ecological groups will become a political factor of the first order which it will be impossible to go on ignoring'. The revolutionary left had a purely abstract conception of the emerging ecological movement. It would be necessary to give those ideologically backward layers 'a total social perspective' in order to unite them to the struggles of the working

class.²⁸ This was doubly unfortunate for the revolutionary left, because the labour movement showed no interest in the ecological question and, at the same time, the vanguard organizations were given short shrift by the new social movements.

The Ecological Question and Party-Building in Europe

The ecological movement has become a factor, meanwhile, which can no longer be ignored, something which cannot be said for many organizations and currents in the Federal Republic that once looked down on this movement. The ecological movement is the most important of the new social movements that have emerged in Europe, leading, in a number of countries, to the formation of parties.²⁹ Political commentators of every hue agree that the ecological and peace movements are here to stay and that they may exercise tremendous political influence both because of their ability to mobilize large masses of people and because of the overall social importance of the political concerns to which they address themselves. On the question of party-building, however, scepticism was expressed right from the beginning: the ecological question is not a possible basis for a party; the process of forming a party has come too soon; the party will fall apart because of its internal differences; parliamentarism will destroy its dynamic; and so on. For instance, to take just one example, Ernest Mandel, speaking of the project of a Green Party in Germany in 1980, said: 'I see the ecological movement as a single-issue party' which will lose its impetus once some concrete goals have been achieved.³⁰

How could this very heterogeneous movement provide the basis for a stable party? Clearly a new mentality has been formed amongst youth, resulting from the general social crisis and the unattractiveness of the traditional labour movement. Sociologists try to capture this mentality with the concept of 'post-materialist need'. It is a movement which addresses itself to new questions that are not within the domain of the traditional parties.³¹

Studies have shown that the ideological assumptions of the followers of those new social movements in the different countries are very heterogeneous. But if we compare the followers of those new social movements in France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Holland, Denmark and Belgium we find that there is a correlation between participation in such movements and self-identification as left or centre-left. Belgium is an exception. Table 1,

Table 1 Ideological Self-assessment of Supporters and Opponents of the New Social Movements (in per cent differences)

		<i>Left</i>	<i>Centre-left</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Centre-right</i>	<i>Right</i>
<i>France</i>						
Ecological	(N-954)	7.9	6.3	-7.5	-4.9	-1.7
Anti-nuclear	(N-961)	17.2	13.0	-19.8	-8.0	-2.3
Peace	(N-951)	11.0	4.1	4.1	-6.7	-1.4
<i>Britain</i>						
Ecological	(N-1037)	2.9	8.2	-2.4	-5.5	-3.0
Anti-nuclear	(N-1119)	6.0	9.8	-0.8	-10.9	-4.1
Peace	(N-1104)	4.3	13.7	-2.6	-10.4	-5.0
<i>W. Germany</i>						
Ecological	(N-759)	11.7	19.1	-3.1	-20.6	-7.2
Anti-nuclear	(N-765)	11.3	24.6	-3.3	-26.9	-5.8
Peace		6.3	20.1	-2.2	-19.3	-5.0
<i>Italy</i>						
Ecological	(N-794)	5.5	-0.8	-4.1	0.4	-1.1
Anti-nuclear	(N-740)	13.7	-3.0	-2.7	-4.2	-3.9
Peace	(N-782)	4.7	0.4	-2.0	-2.5	-0.5
<i>Holland</i>						
Ecological	(N-888)	4.6	14.5	-7.0	-5.5	-6.5
Anti-nuclear	(N-940)	16.9	20.7	-12.0	-18.4	-7.1
Peace	(N-921)	14.7	19.9	-6.3	-17.5	-10.7
<i>Denmark</i>						
Ecological	(N-736)	18.4	15.5	-15.4	-15.2	-3.3
Anti-nuclear	(N-804)	17.4	13.9	-9.4	-14.8	-7.0
Peace	(N-797)	12.2	6.7	4.3	-19.0	-4.2
<i>Belgium</i>						
Ecological	(N-631)	2.2	-0.7	-4.9	4.7	3.2
Anti-nuclear	(N-645)	1.5	-2.0	-9.7	2.1	3.1
Peace	(N-646)	0.1	0.1	-10.2	1.9	3.2

based on percentage differences, is very informative. The higher the positive values are, the stronger is the correlation between ideological self-identification and willingness to participate in the activities of the new social movements.

It would be wrong to assume, therefore, that this famous new politics cuts across the old politics, the politics of left and right. This is borne out by Table 1 which shows a strong correlation between self-identification as left or left of centre and a post-materialist value orientation. What is more significant is the fact that this layer organizes itself independently and is largely indifferent to the fact that the traditional working-class movement, Social Democratic or Communist, also identifies itself as left or left of centre.

A second problem remains. Why are the various green parties of Western Europe so dissimilar? Why are the Danish left-wing Socialists, the representatives of the Italian Proletarian Democracy, the Dutch Pacifist Socialists and the British Labour left closer to the German Greens in the European Parliament than are their Green brothers and sisters from Belgium and France? Why has the electoral success of the Greens in Western Europe been so uneven?

The ecological question is clearly not the central question facing society. Ecologists are not united in offering a way out of the crisis nor is the ecological approach the chief constituent element of the social subject capable of changing society. Similarly, the ecological movements do not offer a comprehensive alternative model for society. The ecological question is amenable to a number of different interpretations and presents itself in a number of national forms.³² In Britain, for instance, because of the first-past-the-post electoral system, the existence of a combative left minority in the traditional labour movement, and a sharp left-right confrontation, the followers of the new social movements have an orientation towards the traditional labour movement. Particular aspects of the ecological question are seen as important, but not the ecological question as such. There is therefore no place for an ecological party as a left alternative.³³ In those countries where there already exists an alternative to the established parties, and where those alternative parties and organizations concern themselves with the new politics, an ecological party occupies a very subordinate place and becomes, in fact, a single-issue party. This is the case, for instance, in Denmark, with the Socialist People's Party (SF) and the Left Socialists (VS); in Holland, with the Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP); in Italy, with the Proletarian Democracy (DP) and the Radical Party (PR). Where the traditional party system is in a profound political crisis, and where the new social movements do not measure up to the challenge, as, for instance, in Belgium,

the ecological party can establish itself on the right as an upholder of traditional values (see Table 1).³⁴ Where the new social movements develop very unevenly as is the case, for instance, in France, where the peace movement hardly exists in comparison with the rest of Western Europe, the process of party formation, in the absence of any pressure from mass movements, is rudimentary and the programme of any such party would be bourgeois.³⁵

The development of the Greens in West Germany did not begin with the formation of the Green Party. This is why the attempt by various clever people to import the West German model into their own country has failed so miserably. The success of the Greens in West Germany, from which a number of lessons can indeed be drawn, was a result of a specific historical development at the objective and subjective level. An understanding of the Green phenomenon in West Germany requires a historical approach. Without a clear understanding of the historical development of post-war Germany it is impossible to understand why the Greens are not a single-issue party, why they constitute a *left* challenge to the traditional Social Democracy, why they are the most important element of social instability in the Federal Republic and what the future can hold in store.