



Eurozine Editorial

Climate politics: Only good on paper?

Social agreement about the necessity of radical ecological change may be unprecedented, yet rhetoric and reality go their separate ways. Are multilateral climate deals inherently ineffective? Is the declaration of commitment to sustainability an exercise in societal self-delusion? A Eurozine focal point debates the politics of global warming.

"Geographical environment is unquestionably one of the constant and indispensable conditions of development of society and, of course, influences the development of society, accelerates or retards its development. But its influence is not the *determining* influence, inasmuch as the changes and development of society proceed at an incomparably faster rate." That is Stalin, writing in his essay *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938). As **Dipesh Chakrabarty writes** in a landmark article, twentieth-century historians including Benedetto Croce, R.G. Collingwood and Fernand Braudel all shared Stalin's basic assumptions about natural history, if little else.

Yet as the global climate reaches "tipping point", the time-honoured distinction between natural and human history is collapsing. Climate research, argues Chakrabarty, obliges us to see human beings not only as biological and historical agents, but also as geological agents. "Whatever our socioeconomic and technological choices, whatever the rights we wish to celebrate as our freedom," he writes, "we cannot afford to destabilize conditions (such as the temperature zone in which the planet exists) that work like boundary parameters of human existence."

Only a multi-disciplinary approach to history can take account of other conditions for the existence of human life that have no intrinsic connection to the logics of capitalist, nationalist, or socialist identities, writes Chakrabarty. In similar multidisciplinary vein, **Virginie Maris surveys** the broad field of "ecofeminism", whose sub-currents range from spiritualist to materialist and redistributive approaches. "If one is careful to allow that there is no category labelled 'woman' but a multitude of persons, men and women, who wish to maintain with the living world a relationship that is different from the one we have inherited from a paternalist and anthropocentric culture, then the dialogue between feminists and ecologists may be a fertile one," she writes.

Although ecological politics has now entered — or been thrust into — the political mainstream, there has been little concomitant increase in the political influence of those who can claim to "have been saying it all along". No one could be more aware of this than **Jürgen Trittin**, leading German Green party MP. Like Chakrabarty, he **points out** that the myth of a nature "untouched" by human beings is a product of industrial society, "the flipside of a civilization

founded upon nature's ruthless exploitation and destruction". Ecologists are now obliged to accommodate the interests — industrial, commercial, political — of those with no wish to preserve nature *per se*. "The more 'nature-oriented' and naive a demand is," writes Trittin, "the less likely it is to be realized, the more improbable ecological improvements are, and the more catastrophic the consequences will be."

Parts of the Left have traditionally frowned upon the idea of nature as an essentialist and moral category — which indeed it can be. Nevertheless, writes Trittin, "the concepts of ecology and sustainability can get by perfectly well without conservative fictions about what is 'natural'. The rejection of such ideological aspects need not prevent anyone acknowledging the urgency of ecological politics." Nature has ceased to be a reactionary or moral category and become one of global justice: mainstream it may be, but ecological politics is no less radical for all that.

Approaching the realm of *Realpolitik*, we find the wide vistas of theoretical possibility contract rapidly. Social agreement about the necessity of radical ecological change may be unprecedented, yet eco-politics remains in a state of paralysis, **writes Ingolfur Blühdorn** in a chastening article on "the politics of unsustainability". The classical eco-political question, "How do we change the social order and societal practices in such a way that they become sustainable?" has, he argues, been overtaken by the unspoken "post-ecologist" question: "How can we sustain social structures and cherished lifestyles which are known to be unsustainable?"

The notions of emancipation, identity, self-realization, prosperity and democracy — once at the very centre of political ecology — have been crowded out by the discourses of technological innovation, resource efficiency and "green" economic growth. "This touches upon fundamental questions such as our freedom to pursue economic success, the right to realize our own preferred lifestyle and identity, to indulge in consumerism, or to travel and be mobile," writes Blühdorn. For any genuine turn towards sustainability, he argues, the limits of rights and freedoms widely held to be sacrosanct must be re-politicized, and their content redefined.

Of course, this would mean political suicide. That is why the bill now under consideration in the US Senate that would regulate emissions has been named the "Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act". "It appears the White House political operation has decided that the best way to enact a policy on climate change is with a message that keeps presidential communication about climate change *per se* to a minimum, and one that focuses almost entirely on US domestic considerations", **comments Rick Piltz**, director of **Climate Science Watch**.

Nevertheless, no amount of Democratic political spin-doctoring can guarantee that the bill will overcome staunch and mainly Republican opposition in the Senate, itself bolstered by the lingering effects of Bush-era climate change disinformation campaigns among the American public at large. "Nobel Peace Prize notwithstanding," writes Piltz, "Obama is unlikely to make any grand gestures at Copenhagen that he expects will be defeated by parochialism and political dysfunction back home."

Not directly accountable to a constituency, the EU has no compunctions about employing the term "climate change"; instead, the problem is the gap between rhetoric and political practice. The EU boasts that European emissions trading

system (ETS) is a flagship model for similar systems worldwide, and has announced ambitious climate protection targets for 2050. But by allocating offset credits too generously (by fixing emissions reduction obligations too low), and by setting the "baseline" to 1990 (overall emissions were reduced as a result of the collapse of heavy industry in eastern Europe), the ETS has created a surplus of credits across the 2008–2012 period. Bankable up to 2020, these credits will pump billions of euros of "hot air" into the system. Together with the fact that the EU will be buying emissions credits from overseas, this means that the advertised targets are considerably less ambitious than they seem.

The gap between EU rhetoric and reality is especially marked in eastern central Europe, as **Keti Medarova–Bergstrom** and **Martin Konecny explain**. The economies of the former satellite countries have remained unchanged in at least one respect: their high level of energy wastage. Amazingly, it requires double the energy to produce one unit of GDP in the new member–states than it does in the old. Insulation and district heating systems are notoriously inefficient; add to that the explosion of car–use in the region, and eastern central Europe becomes the EU's major obstacle to reaching the emissions reduction targets it has set for 2020. So why does funding allocated through the European Union Structural Fund and Cohesion Fund still disfavour climate–friendly development?

Rhetoric and reality also go their separate ways where the G8 is concerned. In L'Aquila in July 2009, the heads of state, including China and India, endorsed the 2° target. If that is to be more than just lip service, **writes Claus Leggewie**, then radical decisions will need to be taken at the climate change conference in Copenhagen in December. Leggewie introduces the concept behind the "budget formula" developed by the German Advisory Council on Climate Change (WBGU), which indicates what a reformed Kyoto protocol might look like. Revolutionary in its core idea that all states are allocated a national *per–capita* emissions budget that links historical responsibility with the current economic capacity, the trading system, say its authors, would offer enormous opportunities to developing countries and potentially provide the key to a "new low–carbon global order".

Overseeing the credits–trading would be a "climate central bank", whose authority (unlike transnational agencies such as the World Bank) would derive from its democratic accountability. Leggewie stresses that an ecological turnaround at the legislative level needs to be embedded in society itself. As he **writes** in a second article co–authored with **Harald Welzer**, "The reorganization of industrial society will only function if it is posed as a project with which members of society identify, in other words if people understand it as *their* project. Then it will become a generator of identity rather than a problem of implementation. However, that will only work if politics is thought of in terms that are participatory and activating."

Nevertheless, principle questions can be raised about the efficacy of multilateral climate agreements. **Simon Zadek writes** that despite near universal consensus that a multilateral treaty is the only way to reduce global carbon emissions, experience shows that top–down mechanics fail. "Whilst our twentieth century deals were deduced from principles into practice, early twenty–first century's international deals must be induced from practice and, on rare occasion, subsequently translated into principles and norms", argues Zadek. "Unilateral action based on national self–interest is the only hope we have of effectively managing climate change."

Questions might also be raised around the scientific uncertainty surrounding the 2° target. Is the authority of political decision-making in climate policy undermined by the fact that the expert opinion it relies cannot claim to be an "exact science"? Potentially, though not necessarily, **writes Åsa Knaggård**. If understood as a "boundary object", the 2° target can be used by the scientific and political worlds each in their own way, while at the same time establishing common ground between them. In an otherwise complex issue, the temperature target is something everyone can understand.

Tim Forsyth and **Zoe Young** are in agreement with the WBGU's proposal insofar as it seeks a reform of existing cap-and-trade solutions that see climate change as a universal risk with equal effects throughout the world. Yet they **call into question** the underlying assumptions of cap-and-trade *per se* and doubt that the Copenhagen summit will be able to improve significantly upon the Kyoto treaty. In its current form, this amounts to a system that interferes with development patterns in the South to offset carbon emissions resulting from "business as usual" in the North. Politics should be seeking alternatives to the trading model, they argue, for example legally binding targets for industry and consumers to seek a proportion of their energy from renewable sources and to improve energy efficiency.

Clearly, "climate politics" is thriving — on paper. Whether it is destined to remain that way, or whether it translates into real political and social change, will be determined in Copenhagen and beyond.

S.G.

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