

Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Forum II : Greens – Between Government Responsibilities and Opposition

What do Green parties think?

By Per Gahrton

An analysis of Green political programs – a contribution to the Heinrich Böll panel at the Global Greens Congress in Sao Paulo, Brasil, May 1st, 2008

Introduction

The Green political movement is spread all over the world. There are probably some political groups calling themselves Green in at least half of the UN Member states. Some 80 Green parties are registered as members of the international political Green family.

What do all these Greens have in common? Do they have anything important in common, something that differentiates them from all other types of political parties? Do they have a common way of thinking, a common outlook upon the development of the society? Do they have the same definition of problems? I have chosen an empirical approach to the issue of Green ideology. I have studied Green political programs.

The world according to Greens

Environmental catastrophe

Almost unanimously Greens have a rather bleak perception of the status of the world. Primarily they see all kinds of environmental threats towards mankind and all life on Earth. It is the relationship between Nature/Life/The Ecosystem and man-made activities which are the focus of almost every Green program and this is given priority both in editing and quantity. I don't find any difference in this respect between parties from rich developed countries and parties from poor developing countries.

The most common Green description of the present situation of the world and human life is that it is full of hazards due to climate change, radiation, pesticides, desertification, manipulation of genes, etc. The Bulgarian Greens put this dramatically: "Extinction or reform!"ⁱ The message is clear: Life itself is threatened.

This leads to an important question: Whose life?

Humanity as starting point

The Austrian Greens have a short discussion around this issue and admit that problems could be seen from a non-anthropocentric perspective, where human beings are not the starting point, but the wider ecosystem. But this is an exception. Quite a few parties however, mention other threatened "groups" like animals (and future generations, but they are also humans!) Most Greens mention the need for

animal “protection”, only a few use the terminology “animal rights” (like Swedish and Norwegian Greens and the Green Left on Netherlands) or “respect for animals” (Catalonian Greens). I find it established that the idea that appears in some versions of “deep ecology”, claiming that human beings are “only” one life form among others, has not been taken on board by Green parties. On the contrary Green parties are firmly based inside a humanity-centered outlook: *We are threatened when Nature/Life/The Ecosystem is threatened.*

Scarcity of justice, solidarity, equality, democracy

Apart from more or less elaborate and apocalyptic descriptions of the environmental hazards that surround us, most Greens also have clear ideas about the state of affairs in political fields other than environment and ecology. But this is treated more by proposals to solve existing problems, than by direct descriptions of the situation that needs to be changed. When the Colombian Greens present an ethical code for politicians as a major item of their policy it is easy to infer that ethics is a rare commodity in Colombian politics.

And when almost every Green party explicitly demands “social justice” and “global solidarity” it must be inferred that the general Green perception is that social justice and global solidarity do not exist, at least not to an acceptable extent, in our present world.

Environment and ecology first

To summarize: It is very obvious that almost all Green parties have the same roots – an awareness of the environmental threats against humanity and life. Greens are also aware of huge social injustice globally and nationally. Very often they have doubts about the quality of democracy in their countries. I would claim that concerning the formulation of what are the main problems of humanity today, there is a rather coherent and common outlook among Greens from all over the world.

Whom do Greens blame?

In general Green programs are weak in explanations. Instead of analysis very often there is a kind of “blaming”. The Green texts point at somebody or rather something, an activity or a trend, which is accused of being guilty. I constructed seven major “scapegoats” on the basis of Green programs and found that number one is *growth/industrial society/productivism*, which means the dominating concentration upon maximum production of material commodities. Italian Greens put it bluntly: “Green is someone who in economic growth sees the original cause for the degradation of our planet”ⁱⁱ.

The second most frequent “scapegoat” is closely related to the previous one: *economic globalization/neoliberalism*. Especially the texts of the French Greens are full of rhetoric against these phenomena. The Turkish Greens demand “global struggle against capitalism and neoliberalism”. And the Russian Greens blame the extreme neoliberalism of the 1990-ies for many of the problems of their country. The Norwegian Miljøpartiet goes rather far when it demands “decapitalisation of the means of production...in a way that transfers the right of property into forms where it

cannot be sold or bought”ⁱⁱⁱ. Also Philippine Greens are far-reaching when they state that “all land belongs to the community occupying it, never to individuals”. Most Green parties explicitly accept private ownership and market economy, but less as a matter of principle, more because such an economy is considered as the least bad system known. And almost all Greens emphasize that the market must not be totally free, but must be put inside tight controls and restrictions.

Also related to the above-mentioned “scapegoats” is number three: *big business/transnational corporations*. The Swiss Greens demand that the bank secrecy of their country should be abolished and exclaim: “End to the hunt for maximum profits!”^{iv}

Many Green parties of course, blame *humanity as such*, like the UK Greens which state: “It is human activity more than anything else which is threatening the well-being of the environment on which we depend”.

Other more or less frequent scapegoats, directly or indirectly mentioned in Green programs, are: *commercialism/consumerism, developed countries/colonialism* (by third world parties but also by some parties in the rich world), *central state abuses* (by some parties in former communist countries).

To my mind this shows, despite some variations, a rather unified Green outlook concerning the causes for the major problems of our world. Humanity is to blame, but not the “naked ape”, but the human being in his/her capacity as a greedy and materialistic producer and consumer who seems to appreciate only items that can be valued in terms of money. This type of system – neoliberalism, capitalism, economic globalization, unrestricted market economy, profit-seeking economy, productivism – not only causes an ecological collapse, it does not even give human beings what they want – happiness, security, health, satisfaction. But Greens don’t believe that the alternative is some kind of traditional socialism, traditional left-wing politics. Most imply this without saying so explicitly in their programs. The Brazilian Partido Verde says it clearly: “PV does not accept the narrow polarization between left and right, we are in front”^v.

Are there common Greens values?

Green programs don’t usually start with descriptions of problems and analysis of causes, but with values. Some Green parties are very explicit about this. I must admit a special preference for the basic principles of the Mexican Greens: “Amor, Justicia, Libertad” (Love, justice, freedom). Short, efficient and to the point! The Swedish Miljöpartiet has tried to concentrate its program in three “solidarities”: Solidarity with animals, nature and the eco-system, solidarity with future generations, solidarity with all the other people in the world. New Zealand Greens have four basic values: ecological wisdom, social responsibility, appropriate decision-making, non-violence. Die Grünen of Austria have six basic principles: ecology, solidarity, self-rule, grass-root democracy, non-violence, feminism^{vi}. Dei Greng of Luxemburg adheres to the same basics as the Austrian Greens, adding another three: structural change of the economy, equal participation of immigrants and promotion of an ecological and social Europe. And the US Greens have their ten key values: grass-root democracy, social justice and equal opportunity, ecological wisdom, non-violence, decentralization,

community based economy, feminism and gender equity, respect for diversity, personal and global responsibility, future focus and sustainability. Even Global Greens and European Greens have also adopted similar catalogues of basic values. Based upon all these programs and platforms I have extracted 14 Basic Green principles. I list them in order of their frequency in the documents I have studied, but I don't give statistics because it is sometimes very difficult to judge if a value is present when the exact word is not mentioned, especially for all programs that were studied in other languages than English:

1. Sustainability/circulation economy.
2. Gender equality/feminism.
3. Non violence.
4. Ecological wisdom.
5. Social Justice.
6. Participatory/Grass-root democracy.
7. International cooperation.
8. Global solidarity.
9. Life quality, not quantity.
10. Human Rights/Freedom.
11. Biodiversity.
12. Cultural Diversity.
13. Fair trade.
14. Self-reliance.

It is my conviction that all these basic Green principles are acceptable to almost all Greens. In any case I did not find any program that could be interpreted as a statement against any of these 14 basic principles. Although some parties support some of these basics more, some less, I believe that almost all Greens could subscribe to all fourteen.

Who are the Greens – according to themselves?

To the Andalusian Greens a real Green is “subversive”. The Brazilian Partido Verde considers itself as “a channel for political action in the institutional field in service of the environmental movement”^{vii}. The Iranian Greens openly declare that they fight for “regime change”. Most Greens clearly identify themselves as belonging to the opposition and as representing a new political dimension. Some Greens take a further step and claim to be neither right nor left, while others maintain that even if they are not “socialists” in any traditional meaning, they all the same belong to a wider left. Judging from the Green programs it is clear that most Green parties stand to the left of center on most issues that can be defined along the left-right scale, but also represent something new when it comes to all the core Green issues that were not part of the political discourse only some decades ago.

Without being able to corroborate it I can admit that from my extensive reading of Green programs I get the impression that there might be some relationship between praxis and theory, that there is more “deep ecology” and “subversive” thinking in the programs of those Greens parties that have the longest distance to executive political power, than in the programs of those Greens who are or have been partners in coalition governments.

Maybe no Green ideology, but a common thinking

As I have shown, on some points Green parties have contradictory opinions; on other issues several parties have no clear or declared position. Emphasis is placed differently, the age and size and place in the political system of every single Green party may play a role for the policy chosen. All the same I have the impression that overall there is a very wide sphere of common Green thinking. It might not be enough to qualify as a Green *ideology*, but at the same time there may very well be an

impressive amount of common thinking by political parties from as different places as Sweden and Somalia, Russia and Brazil, Taiwan and Benin.

Per Gahrton

President of the Swedish Green Think Tank Cogito, Co-secretary of the European Greens 1984-89, Member of the European Parliament 1995-2004

This text is based upon a contribution to the booklet "Is there a need for a Green Ideology", which was published in May 2008 in English, Spanish and Swedish by the Swedish Green Think Tank Cogito. Information about how to obtain copies of that publication could be found at the website www.cogito.nu.

Footnotes (longer quotes in original languages):

ⁱ да ремонтираме дома си или да го видим разрушен.

ⁱⁱ Verde è chi vede nella crescita economica, imperniata sullo sfruttamento più intenso ed esteso della natura e del lavoro umano, la causa originaria dello stato di degrado del nostro pianeta,

ⁱⁱⁱ De Grønne vil stabilisere økonomien, blant annet ved å dekapitalisere produksjonsmidlene. Det vil si å få eiendomsretten over i former hvor den ikke blir gjenstand for kjøp og salg.

^{iv} Schluss mit der Jagd nach Profitmaximierung

^v O PV nao se aprisiona na estreita polarizacao esquerda versus direita. Situa-se à frente.

^{vi} Ökologisch, solidarisch, selbstbestimmt, basisdemokratisch, gewaltfrei, feministisch

^{vii} Funciona como um canal de acao politica, no campo institucional, para servir o ambientalismo