Istituto Affari Internazionali

The New European Commission's Green Deal and Geopolitical Language: A Critique from a Decentring Perspective

by Daniela Huber

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus crisis deeply challenges the assumption that we human beings can dominate nature. Contraposing the new European Commission Green Deal and geopolitical language with critical/green thought, this paper aims to provoke reflections on a re-imagination of the European Union as part of a larger regional and global community that lives together within a green and diverse planet.

European Union | Climate change | Environment | Coronavirus

keywords

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

IAI PAPERS 20 | 06 - APRIL 2020

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

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Introduction

On her 100th day in office, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presented progress on the key parameters of her programme, namely "turning the fight against climate change into an opportunity for jobs and growth", "reaping the benefits of technology and making it work for people" and "strengthening the EU's geopolitical clout".[1] This paper will shed light on these claims from a "decentring" perspective,[2] particularly pointing out two possible traps. The first is that we, the humans, can make nature work for us through technology, and transform climate change mitigation and containment into jobs and growth, rather than radically re-imagining our way of life in synchronisation with the nature of which we are part. The second is that we, as Europeans, need to strengthen the geopolitical clout of the European Union just as Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are trying to do with respect to the United States and Russia, rather than pursuing a radical re-imagination of the European Union as part of a larger regional and global community that lives together within a green and diverse planet.

[1] European Commission, *A Union That Strives for More: The First 100 Days*, 6 March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_403.

[2] The call for a "paradigm shift that decentres the study and practice of Europe's international relations" has been amplifying in IR and EU foreign policy studies. Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power", in *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (June 2013), p. 283-303, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713485384. This shift is, on one hand, away from Eurocentrism, but – as this essay argues – a decentring paradigm also challenges our assumptions that the globe circulates around us.

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· Paper prepared for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), April 2020.

Both inherent points – domination of nature and of others – are closely interlinked. In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* ("Dialectic of the Enlightenment"), published towards the end of the Second World War, the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno defined the "essence of enlightenment" as the "choice between alternatives", further arguing that "the inescapability of this choice is that of power. Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self".[3] Adorno and Horkheimer further contended that the inevitable mastery "of nature is reproduced within humanity".[4] As Vanessa Lemm has pointed out,

> For Adorno and Horkheimer, our form of thought – the way we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world – directly determines the form of our social and political organization, and vice versa. In order to overcome social and political organization based on domination, one needs to overcome forms of thought that dominate.[5]

As the coronavirus pandemic challenges the assumption that we actually can dominate nature,[6] a window might have opened to actually overcome such a "thought that dominate[s]". In this context, this paper aims to critique the thought inherent in the new European Commission's Green Deal as well as its new geopolitical language from a perspective which decentres Europe in its relationship to both nature and the "other".

1. Towards a decentred relationship with nature

Since the emergence of environmentalism, Critical Green Theory in International Relations has criticised "humanity's increasingly instrumental relationship with nonhuman nature, along with the subjugation of indigenous peoples and many traditional forms of agriculture" and called "into question anthropocentrism or human chauvinism – the idea that humans are the apex of evolution, the centre of value and meaning in the world, and the only beings that possess moral worth".[7] Indeed, a ground-breaking, Copernican revolution is taking place in the sciences at large in response to the human-made floods and fires engulfing our planet. The

[3] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 25.

[4] Ibid., p. 86.

[5] Vanessa Lemm, "Critical Theory and Affirmative Biopolitics: Nietzsche and the Domination of Nature in Adorno/Horkheimer", in *Journal of Power*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April 2010), p. 76.

[6] There have, of course, been pandemics in recent times which have, however, never achieved the same attention in the West as they have hit poorer countries of the world harder. The Ebola crisis in West and Central Africa is an example.

[7] Robyn Eckerslay, "Green Theory", in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, 4th ed., Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 262-263.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

revolution is distilled in the concept of the "Anthropocene" – the "human epoch" – the "product of the cogitations of serious geologists who, until recently, had been totally indifferent to the ins and outs of research in the human and social sciences".[8]

As Bruno Latour, the French sociologist and philosopher, has pointed out, "No postmodern philosopher, no anthropologist, no liberal theologian, no political thinker would have dared measure the influence of humans on the same scale as rivers, volcanos, erosion, and biochemistry".[9] The concept unravels modernist constructions of the world, and the fact that this shift comes from within the natural sciences "is highly significant, considering the impact this has for ways in which we can imagine politics and governance".[10] Particularly, as David Chandler has argued, this "contemporary radical critique seeks to transform (or decentre) the human in order to put the world at the centre" and the "goal of critique thus becomes that of 'learning to adapt to the world' or to listen to what the planet 'is telling us', rather than to 'hubristically' seek to direct, shape or control our external world".[11] It is, therefore, not planet Earth which is sick, but the humans who think to be its masters. The Earth does not circulate around us, but we are an intrinsic part of it. Both these messages are indeed evidenced to us by the coronavirus.

What then is the impact of this revolution on politics and governance? So far, it has not yet fully arrived in this sphere, as can be shown with the European Green Deal promoted by the new European Commission. The Green Deal is endowed with 1 trillion euro, spread over ten years, to reduce the EU's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 per cent compared with the levels of emissions in the year 1990. Its purpose is to transform "the Union into a *modern, resource-efficient* and *competitive economy*" investing in "environmentally-friendly technologies", "supporting industry to innovate", "rolling out cleaner, cheaper and healthier forms of private and public transport", "decarbonising the energy sector", "ensuring buildings are more energy efficient" and "working with international partners to improve global environmental standards".[12] While these are important steps, they follow the same market-based, technocratic and instrumental rationale of the ecological modernisation paradigm. That is, they *change the instruments* of production, consumption and growth, but *do not question the goals* of endless production, consumption and growth.

German sociologist Ulrich Beck has proposed the concept of "reflexive modernization" in which we think not only about the means of modernisation

[8] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Cambridge/Medford, Polity Press, 2017, p. 117.

[9] Ibid.

[10] David Chandler, Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene. An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking, London/New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 5.

[11] David Chandler, "The Transvaluation of Critique in the Anthropocene", in *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 2019), p. 27.

[12] European Commission website: *A European Green Deal. Striving to Be the First Climate-Neutral Continent*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

but also its *ends*. In *Risikogesellschaft* ("Risk Society"), published in 1986, he argues that "Max Weber's concept of 'rationalization' no longer grasps this late modern reality, produced by successful rationalization. Along with the growing capacity of technical options [*Zweckrationalität*] grows the incalculability of their consequences."[13] This can be well exemplified with "clean" wind and solar energy which depend heavily on batteries which – in turn – depend on the exploitation of lithium and all the environmental and social problems this raises.[14] We then need to think more radically not only about the "energy transition" but a "life transition" involving how we all live our daily lives. As Beck et al. have argued, "What is new is that modernity has begun to modernize its *own foundations*. This is what it means to say modernity has become reflexive. It has become directed at itself."[15]

2. Towards a decentred relationship with the "other"

The "idea that humans are the apex of evolution, the centre of value and meaning in the world, and the only beings that possess moral worth" (in the words of Robyn Eckerslay quoted above) is not only evident in our relationship with nature, but crucially also in our relationship with the "other". As Edward Said argued in his path-breaking work on Orientalism, the depiction of European superiority over Oriental backwardness justified European domination of the East.[16] This Orientalism has always also been present in the environmental field. Diana K. Davis has pointed out that

> With the rise of Anglo-European imperial power in the region [...] in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an environmental imaginary began to be constructed that frequently portrayed the Middle East and North Africa as being on the edge of ecological viability or as a degraded landscape facing imminent disaster. Because the local inhabitants were most often blamed for the environmental degradation, by deforestation, overgrazing, or overirrigation, for example, this environmental imaginary allowed the telling of stories, or narratives, that facilitated imperial goals in the name of "improvement" and, later, of environmental "protection."[17]

This depiction justified colonialism in the name of the environment while indigenous voices and their environmental visions were marginalised.

[13] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London, Sage, 1992, p. 22.

[14] Rafael Sagárnaga López, "Bolivia's Lithium Boom: Dream or Nightmare?", in *Diálogo Chino*, 15 September 2015, https://dialogochino.net/en/?p=3459.

[15] Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss and Christoph Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization: Problematic, Hypotheses and Research Programme", in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2003), p. 1-33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276403020002001 [italics added].

[16] Edward W. Said, Orientalism, London, Vintage Books, 1978.

[17] Diana K Davis, "Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East. History, Policy, Power, and Practice", in Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke (eds), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2011, p. 2.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

Orientalism continues to be with us today in many respects. Regarding the environmental field in particular, the Middle East is still subject to orientalist depictions by Europe and the West at large. In *Carbon Democracy*, for example, Timothy Mitchell argues that, while we commonly speak of the Middle Eastern "oil states" and "oil curse", Western democracies are in fact also oil states (and have their own oil curse, see below). Mitchell contends that

> Without the energy they derive from oil their current forms of political and economic life would not exist. Their citizens have developed ways of eating, travelling, housing themselves and consuming other goods and services that require very large amounts of energy from oil and other fossil fuels.[18]

This way of life and the assumption that the future is a "limitless horizon of growth" are unsustainable.[19] Indeed, the Western democracies' own "oil curse" has emerged in Europe, the US and beyond not only in the form of environmental degradation but also in the form of nationalist ethnocentric populism which endangers the democratic foundations of Western industrial states. Bruno Latour has argued that the rise of nationalist populism today cannot be compared with the trend that appeared before World War II, but has to be seen in the context of environmental degradation, which is met with denial in a nationalist populist agenda.[20] While research on this issue is just beginning,[21] the most prominent example is US President Trump who has repeatedly called climate change a hoax.[22]

How does the European Green Deal sit in this context? It represents an important step to deal with climate change, but – as argued above – it still works on the assumption that limitless growth is possible. Furthermore, it lacks a global dimension, as it does not ask how climate change differently impacts various parts and populations of the globe and, more importantly, how Europe's own energy transition does. Rather *it constructs Europe at the apex of the Green revolution* as "climate neutral" in 2050, as "a global leader" in the fight against climate change or as the exporter of "clean technologies".[23] As such, it obscures the fact that Europe over the past century has been and still is one of the major polluters worldwide

[18] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London/New York, Verso, 2013, p. 6.

[19] Ibid., p. 253.

[20] Bruno Latour, *Anthropocene Lecture*, 4 May 2018, https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p_140211.php.

[21] Research is only in its infancy in exploring why both rightwing populism's leaders as well as its supporters "tend to be climate sceptics and hostile to policy prescribing action on climate change". Matthew Lockwood, "Right-Wing Populism and the Climate Change Agenda: Exploring the Linkages", in *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (July 2018), p. 712-732.

[22] Philip Bump, "This Is Perhaps Trump's Most Cynical Comment about the Environment Yet", in *The Washington Post*, 9 January 2020, https://wapo.st/2N9lFVK.

[23] European Commission, *The European Green Deal* (COM/2019/640), 11 December 2019, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0640.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

thereby co-responsible for the climate change that hits poorer regions of the world[24]; and further, that there is no entirely "clean technology" as also wind and solar energy depend on the extraction of lithium in Bolivia or the Democratic Republic of Congo for the batteries needed to store the energy.[25] With its exclusive focus on Europe, the Green Deal keeps up the borders the EU has drawn – which are recognised by neither the climate crisis nor the current coronavirus crisis. It thus misses a larger re-imagination of the EU as part of a larger regional and global community which lives together within a green planet.

Such a re-imagination would notably also necessitate that the EU rethink its larger economic and geopolitical role in the world. Regarding the economic role, European development aid has environmental components, but an extensive literature has shown that it generally follows a European development model rather than supporting locally rooted ones.[26] Furthermore, as particularly critical scholars have argued, what is needed is to

> create the conditions for poorer countries to develop according to their own democratically chosen development path. For that to happen, degrowth policies have to be coupled with decolonisation of the global economy. [....] If the GND [Green New Deal] does not address the uneven patterns of where production and consumption take place then it threatens to derail "green" or energy-efficient transformations in the global South.[27]

Regarding the EU's geopolitical role, the new Commission speaks of a strengthening of EU's geopolitical clout, where the EU needs to "learn to use the language of power" and to "develop an appetite for power".[28] Whilst it is not entirely clear yet what the Commission means by "power", European history has shown how specifically hard power can always be abused, particularly in a context where ethnocentric nationalist populism is growing. Rather than being hostage to the prisoner's dilemma opened up by Trump, Putin and many others, and investing in European hard power, the EU should resist this construction of world politics and transform it into international cooperation, by investing in areas where the EU is strongest, particularly diplomacy towards crucial conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, multilateralism and international law, as one of its central institutions.

[24] Henry Bewicke, "Chart of the Day: These Countries Have the Largest Carbon Footprints", in *WEF Articles*, 2 January 2019, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/chart-of-the-day-these-countries-have-the-largest-carbon-footprints.

[25] Rafael Sagárnaga López, "Bolivia's Lithium Boom: Dream or Nightmare?", cit.

[26] Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, "Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations of MEDRESET", in *MEDRESET Policy Papers*, No. 10 (July 2019), https://www.iai.it/en/node/10585.

[27] Vijay Kolinjivadi, "Why a 'Green New Deal' Must Be Decolonial", in *Al Jazeera*, 7 December 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/green-deal-decolonial-191202134707310.html.

[28] Josep Borrell, quoted in Pauline Bock, "EU Must Develop 'Appetite for Power' Says Foreign Policy Chief", in *Euronews*, 17 February 2020, https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/16/eu-must-develop-appetite-for-power-says-foreign-policy-chief-josep-borrell.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

3. Becoming reflexive on the EU Green Deal and new geopolitical language

Concretely, to help us become more reflexive on EU foreign and environmental policy, we could start with asking questions, which are surely only first steps in what would need to be a long process of reflection.

Firstly, regarding foreign policy, how can we stop thinking about foreign policy as "foreign" (i.e., as making others foreign, as David Campbell has pointed out),[29] *but rather as "global" and thus as a policy in the framework of a global community?* How can we streamline green thought into such a policy? More particularly, in terms of economic policies, what proposals does the EU have for re-structuring the global economy? Regarding development policy, how can we think about a new development policy which does not impose a particular "model" on others? The EU needs to "learn how to learn"[30] from indigenous or local populations to provide support only if and for what it is requested. How can the EU, for example, support sustainable farming? How can it move against the "slow violence" which has ripped the indigenous populations of their life worlds,[31] including through neoliberal globalisation? More particularly, how does the European energy transition impact on other parts of the world and how will Europe compensate those areas for the ensuing environmental and social costs?

Regarding the Green Deal, how can we go beyond its focus on Europe and take a more global perspective? *Furthermore, how can we go beyond the Zweckrationalität*, that is thinking in terms of market efficiency, competitive economy and growth, towards a conception of living our lives within nature? While this paper has principally focused on critiquing European policies and language, these questions concern us all, implicating our daily lives which are entirely rooted in endless growth, production and consumption. As Anna Tsing has pointed out, "living with the end of modernist dreams of progress need not be a negative experience. Rather, we can come to realise that modernity itself was a barrier to living fuller lives."[32]

Updated 9 April 2020

[29] David Campbell, *Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

[30] Cathy Caruth, "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", in *PMLA*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (October 2010), p. 1020-1025.

[31] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2011.

[32] David Chandler, "The Transvaluation of Critique in the Anthropocene", cit., p. 36.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

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ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-126-1

IAI PAPERS 20 | 06 - APRIL 2020

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