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## Environmental Justice and the Green Vote in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Three researchers who are environmental justice experts in France, Canada and the United States, analyse the progress of the ecologist vote at the European elections of May 2019. Interview with Lydie Laigle, Nathalie Lewis and Kristin Reynolds, conducted by Sophie Moreau.

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**Sophie Moreau:** Let us proceed with the introductions first.

**Kristin Reynolds:** I am a geographer and an independent researcher in New York City; I also lecture in two universities in the United States: New School and Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. My areas of research are urban agriculture, food systems and social justice in the global food system, with an action research perspective: how can researchers, through their research work, become part of the fights for social justice and food justice.

**Nathalie Lewis:** I define myself as a socio-political analyst, between political science and environmental sociology. I currently lecture at the University of Québec in Rimouski, and I head the Societies, Territories and Development Department. This interdisciplinary department in social sciences tackles the notion of development in a critical way, whether international, territorial, social or... I hesitate to say it, sustainable development, because this paradigm has been used to say so many things! I am also heading a research group on interdisciplinarity in territorial development. The notion of territory makes it possible to think about issues of justice (i.e. environmental and social justice), and about inequalities (fair or unfair). Up until 2007, I worked at the CEMAGREF (that later became IRSTEA), and was in charge, among other things, of cases linked to the "social forest", in which the notion of justice, overlapping the various uses and users, made sense. I still adhere to this way of reading our interactions with nature, that brings issues of political ecology to the fore.

**Lydie Laigle:** I am a sociologist and research director at the *Centre scientifique et technique du bâtiment* (CSTB), a semi-public research organisation based in France. I am attached to the *LABEX futurs urbains* of the University of Paris-Est. I lecture at the French School of Civil Engineering (*École des ponts and chaussées*) for the Master's programme on sustainable development, post-carbon urban forecasting, energetic and territorial transitions. At the turn of the Millennium, I began to study the policies of European cities on sustainable development. I took an interest in environmental inequalities and civic participation, because these two issues were not sufficiently taken into account in the policies. This led me to question the notion of environmental justice. Where environmental justice evolved under the influence of environmental mobilisation and climate change, I then took an interest in the notion of climate justice. Pursuing my research at the crossroads of civic approaches and public policies, I focused on the analysis of ecological transition and the unique way in which it links social and environmental issues, as well as local and global issues.

**Sophie Moreau:** The second point is your general comment on the progress of the green vote at the last European elections, in Europe, and in France in particular.

**Nathalie Lewis:** Seen from the outside, and by someone who has been observing for 30, perhaps 40 years, increasing concerns about the environment and the ecology, I would like to see the green vote in Europe as something positive, but I have the impression that, rather, it is something that is still highly political, that it is still in a reactive or protesting mode. We will probably have to wait until the next election to see how things are going to develop. There has been so much conflict between the parties of the left, in most European countries as in America, the West and beyond. Parties of the left have become weaker during the last decades, finding themselves; they are fragmented. Also, like other analysts, I have the impression that part of the green vote comes from disillusioned left-wing voters. Did these voters truly vote as convinced ecologists, and are we in fact on our way to a transition? We can feel a certain pressure, but it is not the first time. I wonder whether this time will be the right one. Have we reached the breaking point? Are we now actually going to be able to start acting in a way that will have a certain impact? I don't know. At the same time, I prefer to see the green section of these elections rather than the right and populist section stemming from the same ballot, but I think we need to wait to see what is going to come out of it.

**Kristin Reynolds:** On the European scale, there is also the possibility that this is a reaction to at least two recent events. First, the fact that the awareness of the seriousness of climate change is now generalised, even if, of course, researchers and ecologists have been aware of it for a long time, and then there is the Paris Agreement and the different reports from the IPCC. And secondly, it could be a reaction to political changes in many industrialised countries that are turning to the right. It's different in each country, but I think that there are people who react in favour of the environment, and people who react against the far right, without automatically being ecologist at heart.

**Lydie Laigle:** What was of concern to me with the green score at the European elections, is the geographic split within Europe. The South-East bloc, from Italy to Poland, via Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, had virtually no green deputy. In North-West Europe, green voters are rather urban and young with a cultural capital. When relating these voters' characteristics to the ecologists' programmes, this vote can be construed as civic defiance vis-à-vis economic globalisation, which is disturbing both the climate and the environment. The geography of the green vote corresponds to urban regions where the effects of globalisation

are perceptible, such as an increase in the property and food prices, ecological degradation and an increase in inequalities. Citizens realise that they are not consulted a lot as regards the orientation given to globalisation, and that they have little means to conceive safeguards for it, faced with an economy that suppresses the living and overbids life. We have the feeling that Europe gave more to lobbies than was due, and leaves little space to civic alternatives. In my opinion, the ecologists, unlike the parties of the left, represent a political force, on the European scale, that can defend a certain conception of citizenship, environmental legislation and tax regulation in the face of economic lobbies.

**Nathalie Lewis:** Indeed, the ecologist movement, in general, represents neither the right nor the left. It is something that was formed and reformed over the decade. In Canada, 15 years ago, the Green Party was a party that defended nature; on certain levels, it could be direct and authoritarian. Populations were not being defended; nature was. The party has evolved. It is more progressive today and proposes different solutions. It makes it possible to imagine other things, other structures. And as highlighted by Lydie, parties of the left, especially in France, have become institutionalised and are caught in some sort of shackles. Voters are sensitive to this, and the green party can offer an alternative for change which traditional parties seem no longer able to conceive.

**Kristin Reynolds:** From the point of view of the United States, things are very different. Even if there is a green party, or more precisely a federation of green parties, and if there were a few elected members, nationally the party is not taken seriously.

**Nathalie Lewis:** The United States and Canada have that in common. The green party in Canada is always very marginal when it comes to voting. This is because, if we go back to the 1970s, when concern for the environment first grew, green militants in Québec and Canada chose not to get involved in formal politics. There is a green party in Canada, but it is not where environmental action takes place. It takes place through NGOs and environmental movements that are fairly powerful, that lobby, campaign and infiltrate society everywhere. Environmental action, if eminently political, takes place on another stage, not on the official political scene.

**Lydie Laigle:** In France, there have always been discussions within ecologist movements to know whether it was necessary or not to become involved in politics. But perhaps what pushed ecologists to enter the political scene is the climate emergency. It is as if there was no longer a choice; it had to be done.

**Nathalie Lewis:** Yes, but with your ballot system, there is the possible weight of the vote – even if it remains unrealistic – to re-orientate the action of the government, while in Québec and Canada, if we want to be efficient when dealing with climate emergency, activists do not turn to the polls to that end. It is a waste of energy, linked to the electoral system that actually excludes minority parties. Therefore, the ecologists are going to influence the various political parties, which is a bit different from what we can see in France.

These last few years, I can really feel the strengthening of civil society which is putting pressure on the government. On recalling the 1970s, in Québec and Canada, just as in France and other European countries, it is the civil society that put pressure on elected members, on politicians, and the latter were compelled to adapt and implement the first environmental policies and create ministries of Environment. After that, I would say that the West started being complacent. And now, for about one and a half years, there is a new, strong pressure, that can rush politicians, and say: “You no longer have a choice, whether you’re from the left or the right wing. You must do something.”

**Sophie Moreau:** How do you feel that pressure from civil society?

**Nathalie Lewis:** In Québec and Canada, energy is the issue; that’s what changed things dramatically. We speak of transition, of climate changes. Our Canadian government is rather open to that. But at the same time, we accept oil pipelines, we push for fossil energy projects from the Pacific to the Atlantic, “Coast to Coast”. There is a very strong reaction against that, but the acceptance of it is even stronger. There is another variable in addition: the growing power of indigenous people that, up until very recently, was made invisible. Today, they are developing their claims on these energy issues, whether oil transport or production, in Alberta, and in other provinces. There is real mobilisation in this regard. And then there is the youth, a bit like in Europe where, every Friday, during the entire spring and winter months, we’ve seen them marching for climate, in Montréal among others, and in Québec. This kind of movement is increasing quietly but strongly.

**Lydie Laigle:** In France, we have known similar trends. During the 1970s, environmental mobilisation took on a certain importance. After that, environmental policies initiated by the State became somehow institutionalised and were led by decentralised services and local authorities. Then, the rise of associations and NGOs changed the situation. They acquired expertise and played a part in debates and decisions on major projects. For a few years now, citizens are joining forces to fight directly against excessive projects impacting on their living

space and highlighting environmental inequality (data centres, factory farms, etc.). With the acceleration of climate change and the delay in climate policies, profiles that up until then were little invested, like the youth, are now joining forces.

What is changing the situation is the fact that environmental mobilisation, that seemed out of reach, is actually spreading. Today we say: "look, in the end, joining forces and fighting is not as complicated as that". The social media help in a way, like that famous petition *l'Affaire du siècle*. But there is also a change in the mentality and practices of citizens who are joining forces locally, who are sending out warnings or relaying their fight on wider scales. In addition, local councillors understand that they need citizens to move forward ecologically.

**Sophie Moreau:** You are pointing out the fact that ecological preoccupations are filtering into society, as are means of action and organisation that do not fit into institutional parties. In France, since the fall of 2018, a major part of political life has been evolving around the Yellow Vest movement, which is a political movement, but other than through institutionalised practices, and with claims that, at the beginning, could have appeared as being anti-ecology, but that, in the end, confirmed the social issues of energy justice, or even environmental justice.

**Nathalie Lewis:** These movements are bothering researchers, because they do not fit in our analytical categories. That's what social movements are all about. Collective action does not come out of a book. It takes place on the ground, and according to the different pressures that are endured by different segments of the population, that are not all the same, and that do not live the same realities. I don't think we need to look for a unified answer, because there is more than one social ill, and we express these ills in the street. This is healthy, it seems to me, because we express what is wrong, then we can perhaps do something about it. We always have a feeling of injustice in relation to somebody else, but what is indeed the injustice of the one compared to that of the other? This philosophical issue is not that simple when we speak of social justice or simply justice, because there is no end to it. But that's what we can read when looking at the Yellow Vest movement; it seems very stimulating to me.

**Lydie Laigle:** The way I see it, the Yellow Vest movement truly symbolises the split between institutional politics and the people, and not just disadvantaged categories, because there is a diversity of social classes among the yellow vests: shopkeepers, civil servants, micro-entrepreneurs, etc. What they are highlighting is that redistribution must evolve. It is not for the people to pay green taxes, but for those who destroy the planet.

Something else also seems interesting to me. It is that call for citizen initiative and for the citizens' initiative referendum (RIC), to allow citizens to have an influence on laws voted by deputies. The message they sent out is: "Watch out the State! When you pass laws, consider the situation in which people find themselves and consider their life constraints; consider whether they are captive of and dependent on the living conditions they are subjected to; consider the effects of your policies and how they affect people's living conditions". This movement issued a message to politicians, saying: "You pass laws that impact unfairly and with very little assessment". This is a very important element of citizenship for potentially linking social justice to environmental justice.

**Kristin Reynolds:** Concerning movements versus formal politics, I totally agree. In the past, and even today, social movements for the environment were very important for social and even political changes. But the green vote, is a vote indeed. And therefore, there is perhaps a greater awareness at the moment than vis-à-vis climate change issues; we can do nothing without taking action at the political level.

**Sophie Moreau:** Is there actually a gap between the green vote and this social movement, or can you see any links?

**Nathalie Lewis:** I would not be prepared to say that social and environmental justice match up all the time, no. For some, social justice is social justice, and there are no environmental considerations. And for the most extreme environmentalists, the environment prevails over social justice. There is a whole spectrum, we can't amalgamate everything. But despite all this, there is some cross-checking.

In 2012, we had a fairly massive student movement, which we call the Red Squares movement. It was opposing the government that wanted to increase school fees at the time. And this student movement had a very positive repercussion. A large part of the population walked down the street every evening. I live in a village where there are almost no students, and every evening, there were demonstrations, a bit like what is happening with the yellow vests. There has been an acceleration of social pressure, and the government was forced to renounce. There was an election, and the government lost. After that, unfortunately, a more conservative government returned and everything went dead. Despite everything, this street movement showed that things can be done differently. We have a new party in Québec, and as I was saying previously, because of our electoral system, it is difficult for a new party to break into the political scene. This third party, Québec Solidaire, stems from the citizen movements linked

to the Red Squares, and today it is the second largest official party. Before being on the political scene, this party wanted to do a different type of politics, by organising citizen meetings. But once it became part of the government apparatus, it went back to being a more classic structure. Also, there is this need to do politics differently, but we are not too sure how to do it "differently". All the parties surf with the environment. All parties do not do it for the right reasons though, but this party, Québec Solidaire, remains the most ecological party among them, and it says that it wants to cross-pollinate social justice and environmental justice. Despite all this, I'm not sure whether we can say that these two things can converge. I'm not sure that social justice and environmental justice are championed by the same people.

**Kristin Reynolds:** I think that, theoretically, we can clearly see the links between social justice and environmental policy, but the way it develops in practice, that we don't know. Concerning the yellow vests, to me this movement is raising two issues. The first being: are we going towards a sort of anti-establishment, anti-political machine, with sentiments that are at the foundation of authoritarian populism in many countries around the world at this stage, or is the organisation of the political machine going to change in the right direction (i.e. positive for the environment and for the working classes)? And the second issue being: supposing that democracies and political parties endure, will green parties find a way to include the issues of the working classes and the workers? I think this is one of the major issues for political parties, not only for the ecologists but for the entire system because, to me, it's really what is underlying the Yellow Vest movement.

**Lydie Laigle:** Indeed, I'm also sceptical about how to link social justice and environmental justice. It is not obvious, as can be perceived through the programmes of the ecologists, including the EELV programme. I'd like to send out messages, this is a good opportunity. There are very important proposals in this programme, such as the creation of a citizen constituent assembly, through which citizens can check the work done by parliament, the recognition of whistle blowers, the fight against social and fiscal dumping between European countries, and immigrant reception. All these proposals contribute to a democratic space founded on co-operation, human rights and nature rights.

Nevertheless, justice remains defined in relation to the fight against tax evasion, financing the ecological transition, respecting rights and socioeconomic redistribution. The future European climate and biodiversity bank comes under this consciousness. However, we remain attached to a redistributive and procedural conception of justice, which is not always adapted to



environmental justice. The latter involves the creation of analytical and thinking criteria other than those of redistributive compensation. Environmental justice presupposes the recognition of the social and political discriminations that are linked to the mutation of the environment and the living. For example, one can find oneself socially discriminated against, through the loss of one's living conditions due to the ecological changes of one's environment, or due to policies that are detrimental to the pursuit of one's lifestyle. It is therefore advisable to explain in detail the situations through which certain categories become dependent on fossil energy, or a degraded environment, without these categories being given an opportunity or the possibility to overcome that situation. These types of issues should mobilise green parties more.

As such, we should not rush into thinking that investing in the environment is good for social issues, for example, that a green economy is going to create jobs or that the energy transition is going to increase one's buying power through a drop in charges. This would be like forgetting that an ecological transition can be unequal, that it can benefit some and not others. That is why it is important to give social issues a place in the ecological transition; to give a place to the exchange of skills, to co-operation between territories, to citizen experimentation, and to local associations. Let's give the means to local structures to make the ecological and energy transition, by supporting the local initiatives of citizens who are well acquainted with the territory and its problematics. Taking into account the situation of the working classes, and making citizenship and social co-operation central to ecology, will make it possible to invent socioecological paths.

**Nathalie Lewis:** I quite agree with you. And I'm thinking of the immigrant crisis, which I find to be an interesting issue, because it links a social issue with an environmental issue. It is not strictly but often linked to climatic issues. But we don't want these immigrants. We deny the origin of the problem – to which we are a party – and, socially, we're turning immigrants away (justifying the rejection with other registers). This crisis shows indeed the difficulty in marrying social issues with environmental issues, and then in forming one body with a problem which is global.

And what I understood from what you were saying Lydie, is that we are in a classic way of doing things. In order to change things at the territorial level, to redistribute socially in a different way, we're going to be told: "we need money". This money, we are going to generate it via green tax instruments. In so doing, we remain in the same development paradigm. And

it is this paradigm that will have to be broken down. I have been observing all the signals of citizens who are demanding that changes take place in a more radical way. But for the time being, the system we have is strong; it is able to recover these unrest movements and refocus them. We are always in the same logic. Changing logic is the next challenge to link this social issue with this environmental issue that have a hard time linking.

**Kristin Reynolds:** I totally agree. And I think that it would be naive to think that we're there, that anti-mechanisation political movements and environmental movements and movements to fight against climate change go together, because the differences in the changes sought are sometimes very wide.

**Lydie Laigle:** I think that we need rather a redistribution of acting powers; i.e. politicians must recognise citizens' contributions and their way of enriching public policies. However, few elected members and authorities know how to do that. It requires elected members and citizens to enter into dialogues and listen to one another, and it requires new links between community initiatives, co-operative economy, public policies and community services.

**Kristin Reynolds:** I wanted to add a few points. Concerning initiatives in food systems and specifically in urban agriculture, I'm speaking from the point of view of my research, I think there is a tendency among certain elected members or even among some who do urban agriculture, to think or hope that these reforms will lead to solutions applicable to all problems. Initiatives for cultivating in town and for green infrastructure are positive, and we need that to develop urban centres by taking into account environmental resilience. Urban agriculture also offers other advantages, education in particular, activities for the youth, social links between people who perhaps would never meet if it was not in a garden. All these things are positive. One of the objectives of my research, is to discover how and up to which point it is positive, and what are the limitations vis-à-vis structural changes for deeper social justice. As shown by theories on environmental justice applied to the concept of food justice, there are distributive aspects, such as accessing environmental or food advantages. But there are also issues of procedural justice. And in the United States, issues of structural ethno-racism (i.e. systemic inequalities based on ethnicity, race) underlie inequalities in political systems, including in policies concerning the environment and food. They are deeper than having access to gardens or supermarkets. If political parties, elected members or decision-makers support these activities, it's positive, but one always needs to take into account the fact that, in itself, it is not a structural social change, which gives more power to make political decisions to populations

that have been marginalised from it for a long time. To come back to the idea of movements fighting for societal changes and/or the political machine, we cannot say that the existence of a garden in a given suburb means more representation politically.

**Nathalie Lewis:** in Québec, the social economy sector and co-operative movement are very well established, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is something no longer talked about, because it is part of the life of the territories. There are many co-operatives, and the social economy is even partly supported by the Ministry of Economy. In the region where I live, there is this project of shared fruit. People get together and go picking fruit everywhere, in the countryside and in town, and redistribute their pickings. This is done in Montréal, and in several other cities. It's interesting; it's useful, but that's not what is going to change the system. I am based in Rimouski; I no longer live in a large city but in a semi-rural territory. Territorial issues there, concern food and transport. When we speak about transport, it is inequitable to tell people who live 60 km away from here: "Listen, we're going to have to limit transport, therefore stay at home". They have few services, and have less food diversity. Eating local food, is great indeed, but it is cold there. Eating local food means eating root vegetables!

**Kristin Reynolds:** You mentioned Sophie a question about the ecologist movements of the youth. In conclusion, I think that we need to highlight these movements, and – I imagine – the importance climate change represents for them. I think that they fear for their future.

**Nathalie Lewis:** Yes, that's true.

**Sophie Moreau:** We always say: it's the vote of the youth, but I'm seeing more the vote of families. Parents are starting to fear for their children; they are wondering about the state of the planet their children are going to live in. It is also the children's protest which is going to make parents or grandparents say to themselves: "Yes, it's now..." It is transgenerational. Generally, there are studies that show the structuring role of families in electoral choices. Often, children vote like their parents, but perhaps in this case it is the other way around.

**Lydie Laigle:** And I think that, indeed, parents, through their children, are beginning to become strongly aware of a future on hold.

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