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Lucile Schmid

► **To cite this version:**

Lucile Schmid. Is environmentalism a remedy for the crisis of democracy?: An elected official's viewpoint. 2015. hal-01150410

**HAL Id: hal-01150410**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01150410>**

Submitted on 11 May 2015

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TEPSIS PAPERS  
April 2015

Lucile Schmid

# IS ENVIRONMENTALISM A REMEDY FOR THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY ?

*AN ELECTED OFFICIAL'S VIEWPOINT*

Low turnout at the polls and public meetings, political dormancy between electoral campaigns, unapologetic careerism within the parties, campaign gimmicks – the list of obstacles to genuine democratic debate keeps growing. As the 2017 presidential election is approaching, that of 2002 still lurks in the memory. Jacques Chirac's election after Lionel Jospin's defeat in the first round administered a democratic and social jolt, which, nevertheless, did not bring about any change in the mainstream parties or any evolution in institutional practices. And, while the National Front has not (yet?) come to be considered as just another party, it nonetheless structures a large part of public debate over several issues – immigration, Islam, security, the rejection of Europe and globalization, and the denunciation of political scandals. If the campaign slogan "Anything but the National Front" comes to pervade the upcoming presidential and legislative electoral campaigns, that will mean that the political vision involving debate over real platforms has failed deeply and lastingly.

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Lucile Schmid

Vice-president of Fondation de l'Ecologie Politique

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Keywords **Environmentalism** **Democracy** **Social contract** **Reform**

Electronic reference <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/TEPSIS>

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Transformation de l'Etat  
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In this context, one may wonder how “democracy can be made more democratic,” to use Sandra Laugier’s and Albert Ogien’s words (1), and whether commonly recognized obstacles to democratic debate would be overcome if an environmental platform was adopted as the foundation of a new social contract.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM IS A CARRIER OF NEW SOCIAL INTERROGATIONS

The environmental platform’s particularity is that it takes the relationship between mankind and the planet into consideration and organizes a sustainable common future for both. To use Amartya Sen’s words, the response to people’s basic needs and the preservation of essential freedoms are inseparable from the protection of common goods and the reduction of our carbon footprint. This approach entails rethinking the hierarchy between human, economic and financial factors (by emphasizing cooperation, harmony and sustainability), and organizing politics around objectives, loci, and processes different from the current modalities of power exercise. The political exercise of environmentalism thus implies that one stop thinking in terms of immediacy and viewing balanced budgets as a priority. It also calls for confrontation with conservative reactions to attempts at transforming a socio-economic system based on growth and productivity.

### **The spread of environmentalism in society**

The French have become increasingly concerned with environmental issues: they have come to consider the fight against climate change as a real priority and become aware of the link between health and the environment. They voice their concern for the quality of life more and more clearly and feel more and more strongly connected with nature. They illustrate the principle “From the local to the global” in many ways, showing how the promotion of participatory democracy, keenness for innovation and rejection of the “system” can work together. Their desire for changing everyday life “at one’s level” goes along with sincere personal convictions and reaches concrete results. Putting profit, material accumulation, and more generally capitalism into perspective and restoring democratic debate and freedom of thought and speech are the guiding principle for these approaches and testify to the link that may exist between the spread of environmentalism and spiritual interrogations.

### **Social issues and environmentalism**

The spread of a type of environmentalism connected to everyday practices raises new questions, including the central one of how it relates with social issues. While

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(1) Sandra Laugier y Albert Ogien, *Le Principe démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014.

it has become bon ton to speak of grassroots environmentalism, the evolution of behaviors is still correlated to living standards and environmentalism still perceived as a luxury that only cultural creatives can afford. It remains nonetheless that environmental and social inequalities are interrelated with each other and could be greatly reduced through the implementation of environmental public policy – a policy that opens up promising perspectives, including employment opportunities. Incidentally, the energy transition, which was the core argument of the environmentalists' platform in 2009, appeared at that time as a credible solution to the need to convert industries and create new trades.

### **Environmentalism as a global approach**

Everyday environmentalism also allows one to envisage the future from a global perspective. The profusion of initiatives and the spirit of experimentation, in themselves, are certainly not intended to transform the existing model entirely (2), and one may hope that involvement of major economic actors or even the state will help break through the “glass ceiling” penalizing us today. The example of the Energy Transition bill is eloquent. The National Debate on the topic has led to drafting a law that may establish a framework – if parliamentary discussions respect the text's equilibrium. However, the project lacks precision on two essential points, i.e., the schedule and means of its implementation. This reflects the limits of a study that, despite its in-depth prospective analysis, has not fully defined the organization of the first stages of the transition – i.e., their integration into the government's immediate priorities – in relation to the long-term attainment period (2030-2050).

### **Is COP21 the challenge of the century?**

Will the climate issue and upcoming international negotiations help break through these barriers and foster the emergence of a global consciousness? Certain mobilizations occurring ahead of the Paris-Le Bourget Climate Conference in December 2015 suggest that they will. It is also the hope of several NGOs (3), which have launched a number of actions associating climate concern with proposals on energy use, local democracy, or building retrofitting. Thus, climate change has made it possible to evoke the differentiated responsibilities of the South and the North, the transformation of the industrial model, or yet, the future of biodiversity. The economic sector has expressed its will to be involved, and fundraising towards helping developing countries adapt to global warming is going smoothly. However, several specialists of climate negotiations have developed a more cautious analysis (4). Since the UN's framework does not by itself guarantee sufficient

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(2) About the profusion of initiatives, see Eric Dupin, *Les Défricheurs*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).

(3) Particularly Alternatiba, Réseau action climat (the French representative of Climate Action Network-international), and Coalition COP-21.

(4) See in particular Amy Dahan and Stefan Aykut, *Gouverner le climat ? 20 ans de négociations climatiques* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2015).

progress, the states' determination to achieve a long-term energy transition is effectively difficult to assess. In fact, progress in terms of climate and other environmental issues could very well be achieved through social mobilization. For example, Chinese society's increased sensitivity to health/environment issues has led to the definition of a national climate project and an evolution in the country's positions. This raises two questions: How does France stand on integrating the environment into national institutions, and what does this tell us about the democratic crisis?

## ENVIRONMENTALISM IS MARGINALIZED WITHIN NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Environmental participation in the French government illustrates the difficulty to conciliate the current institutional logic with the defense of programmatic objectives. It also reveals, through coalitions with the Socialists in which environmentalists play but a supporting role, the paradox between the global ambition of the environmental platform and the realities of power exercise.

Green presence in Lionel Jospin's government between 1997 and 2002 was not as fruitful as expected. Not only did it produce limited results on environmental issues, but exchanges between the prime minister and Dominique Voynet, minister of the Environment and former Green party national secretary, had never been conceived as involving strategic co-responsibility. Fifteen years later, between May 2012 and March 2014, the reiterated Green participation in the government was not more convincing. Like the first one, it had been preceded by a programmatic and electoral agreement. And yet again, the debate and decision-making mechanisms at work in countries with parliamentary and coalition government traditions – Germany, Sweden, etc. – have not structured intra-governmental relations. With the sharply increased presidentialization of politics following the introduction of the five-year presidential term in 1997, the inversion of the electoral calendar, and primaries on the Left, government operations have become even less favorable to collegiality than during the time of the left-wing coalition. As a result, neither minister of the Environment could have much steering influence on the government: the National Debate on the Energy Transition was disappointing, the budget of the Ministry of the Environment has never been spared budgetary discipline, none of the pledges on the reduction of the share of nuclear power were fulfilled. The environmentalists eventually chose to leave the government on the grounds of their difference of opinion on the Roma issue when Manuel Valls took up his functions as prime minister. Their relations with the Socialists continued to deteriorate with the result that the ALUR law on housing was greatly amended and that they doubted whether they could have any real impact on the preparation of the Paris Climate Conference.

Significantly, the Green party is now divided on the question of its participation in the

government. The lack of a balanced political partnership and the gap between the commitments of presidential candidate François Hollande and his actual policies have deeply divided advocates of participation from supporters of an alliance with the critical Left, as in the municipal elections in Grenoble or the Syriza coalition in Greece. A possible third way, called “autonomous environmentalism,” could condition support to the government’s politics on a programmatic content. It has not been defined concretely within the party and never been presented as such in the media, which focuses on the theatrics of the division. Consequently, the question of Green participation in the government has acquired an existential dimension. It goes along with a strong moral interrogation within environmental culture about purity and compromise of principles, exemplarity, and refusal to be taken hostage. Some environmental representatives’ advocacy of institutional legitimacy has been weakened by the Socialists’ attitude, which favors short-term power relations. These disputes have mobilized the Greens’ energies and thrust them into the limelight to the effect that their platform, forceful ideas, and ability to do politics differently by speaking freely and engaging in non-institutional forms of politics have apparently been rendered ineffective. As a result, exercising institutional responsibilities dissociated from programmatic content now appears as an impasse.

However, the situation is more encouraging on other fronts. The environmentalists have made it to the European Parliament and achieved electoral breakthroughs locally. Urban and territorial environmentalism is firmly entrenched and has been appropriated by elected officials from a great variety of parties – the Greens, Socialists, centrists, and, judging from Mayor Alain Juppé’s realizations in Bordeaux, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). Be that as it may, the importance of environmentalism is downplayed by the current rules of the political game, and the implementation of its platform has been delayed and reduced to short-term tokenism. One may even consider that there never has been a “ratchet effect” on environmental issues in the governance processes of either political side. The ecotax, adopted in 2007 and suspended overnight in 2013, is a good example of this. In the same vein, the reduction to 50% of the share of nuclear power in the production of electricity was one of the strong engagements of the first environmental conference in September 2012, but is still being challenged in 2015.

## A FEW PROPOSALS FOR MAKING ENVIRONMENTALISM THE CARRIER OF BETTER DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

### **A new social contract**

The political exercise of environmentalism (political ecology) offers a set of coherent values allowing to rethink political, economic and social processes, and presents new prospects and a vision of the world from a European and international perspective. It questions productivity, places humanity back into its natural environment,

redefines the links between private and professional lives, and places equality at the center of people's lives by focusing on respect for difference and diversity. It advocates the ban on multiple mandates and the democratization of political candidacies (random drawing, calls for citizens' candidacies, statute of elected officials), and also promotes a more democratic functioning of institutions (parliamentary government, relations between society and elected officials, assessment of representatives' work and concrete results). Last, it is committed to controlling and monitoring finance, and denounces the importance of tax havens and conflicts of interests between the political world and certain companies.

The environmental platform thus presents a unique and novel mix of preservation objectives, respect for traditions, a reflection on globalization based on real knowledge of the evolution of societies and the mechanisms governing innovation and change, and proposals for installing a non-market globalization. While all political groups debate and act on a short-term basis, environmentalism proposes a new social contract in which the fight against inequalities is closely related to consideration of the long term – that of future generations.

### **Environmental and democratic proposals**

Given the context of citizen distrust of political parties, the immediate task is to supplement the number of environmental support groups in order to develop the full spectrum of the environmental platform. In that regard, Nicolas Hulot's Ecology Pact initiative should be permanently structured so as to constitute a form of questioning and assessment of politicians' environmental commitments. There is also need for a will to break away from political coalitions. No electoral agreement should be concluded at any level unless a binding platform, and above all, a decision-making process associating the environmentalists to strategic decisions have been agreed upon beforehand. Entering institutions should thus go along with the freedom to leave if these engagements are not respected. Europe Ecologie-Les Verts (EELV) should also work on developing tools adapted to its values and able to mark its difference from other political actors – as for example, the importance of the long term, or attention to international and European issues. Thus, a long-term national, European and international environmental political agenda could set proactive objectives to achieve certain flagship measures of the environmental platform by 2050.

As far as institutions are concerned, several measures have already been identified during discussions about a possible Sixth Republic. Introducing a percentage of proportional representation at legislative elections would ensure that political families are represented more equitably. As a matter of fact, proportional representation was part of the agreement signed in 2011 between EELV and the Socialists. Its implementation was stalled because it would have allowed the National Front to gain a significant number of seats. However, the presence or absence of National Front representatives makes no difference to the classical Right, whose desire to ingratiate itself with that party's electorate has led it to pass on its ideas. In that respect, open confrontation leading to clear positioning would be

preferable. Introducing proportional representation would also have the advantage of rewriting the rules of a game that no longer appeals to citizens. One needs to increase parliamentary momentum, for what is at stake is the spirit of institutions as much as institutions themselves. Reflection on the question should envisage proposals of legal reform together with propositions based on observation of parliamentary life and the latitude to be used with respect to the executive branch.

However, launching a new political party does not seem to be the solution for revitalizing democracy, for even the best ideas are rapidly stripped of their value by the inevitable logic of the French political state apparatus. One should nonetheless take action to put an end to the parties' being closed in on themselves. While the logic of primaries provides citizens with an incentive to mobilize, it has the drawback of focusing attention on persons instead of placing the platform/incarnation relation where it belongs, i.e., at the heart of the debate. Encouraging citizens to challenge political parties and reject their development into mere "candidate nomination mechanisms" likely represents the definitive way out. In order to give import to the idea of democratic opening, one could even envisage that organized citizens united around a project or a couple of strong ideas participate within extant political parties at crucial moments (before selecting candidates for legislative office, for example). The mere "threat" of doing so could even be used to pressure ruling parties into respecting their platform.

Last, devising a means to expand the circle of candidates running for office and particularly the circle of elected officials seems fundamental to us. Due to its practices and organization, the political system has turned into a highly professionalized world. How many representatives have modest or foreign origins and are less than 40 years old? How many see their mandate not as a job or a career, but as a temporary opportunity to exercise democratic responsibility that can be called into question and give way to a changeover after one or two mandates? The emergence of leading figures from society is needed to give a signal. And the reform that would most likely enlarge this circle in the short term consists in elaborating a concrete status of elected officials.