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# **BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE CRISIS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE STATE OF FRENCH GREENS**



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If you find the French political and the French Greens situation difficult to grasp and hard to read, it may be because the reference point of your analysis is one of a political party doing "normal politics", i.e., we want to achieve something, so we forge alliances to that end. If you recognise the fact that the majority of the likes of Jean Vincent Placé have a whole different modus operandi it all becomes very clear. Their only goal is to secure themselves a job!

More often than not, to do this they have to give something up to the Socialist Party (PS for the French acronym), "offer a service" that runs counter to the interest of local activists. This complicates things slightly. For many, "no longer having alliances with the PS" is tantamount to "forging an alliance with the French Communist Party (PCF)." That would be the only other choice. This tactic is not necessarily satisfactory for proponents of a "normal" ecological policy of substance.

It is useful to look more carefully into the intellectual and moral dimensions - in addition to the political ones - of the EELV (French Greens) crisis.

## The Political Crisis

Fundamentally, this is the most serious crisis, but it does not stem from within political ecology itself. The EELV crisis is simply collateral damage from the overarching crisis of the French left.

For a long time, ecologists ran propaganda politics: the sole aim was to spread their ideas. Then, at the end of the 1980s, voters gave them enough of a voice to be able to begin experimenting with political ecology in practice. In 1992, their showing in the regional elections meant, in Ile-de-France, a negotiated agreement for "support without being a part of a ruling coalition" with the right-wing president. In exchange, their policies were discussed and adopted.

In Nord-Pas-de-Calais on the other hand, they were able to grab the presidency by negotiating on a case-by-case basis the support of the PS, PCF and centrists. What about nationally?

From 1992 to 1997, the Greens underwent an in-house crisis. They squabbled over three main issues:

Should we try to govern?

If so, by entering governing coalitions?

If so, with whom?

Eventually, the answer (as a majority) turned out to be respectively:

1. Yes, but not just only, as a presence in social movements must be maintained.
2. Yes, but only on the basis of a contract that is constantly monitored for compliance.
3. As a general rule (but only a general rule), with the historic Left.

Today's crisis is different: the "historic Left" has fallen to pieces. For the Greens, the response thought up in 1997 does not work anymore, because they no longer have a "solution for governing." The PS is no longer "as a general rule" the party of the moderate left (in the democratic and social sense of the term), nor is it compatible with ecological aims. The PCF essentially no longer exists, it has been exhausted by decades of productivist and nationalist paralysis. The only components that remain are of the progressive left (such as the Parti de Gauche - PdG, or Ensemble), but they are not always very Green, are too few in number, and they struggle to sway the working class. Subversions of the socialists and the deafness of the communists have meant that the extreme right Front National (FN) has become the top party amongst the working class in France and is making inroads with the employers too.

The Greens have a political formula to approach the situation, but the current environment is not conducive to systematically applying that formula successfully. So, either they give up on trying to integrate their platform into the institutions, or they defend it pragmatically in different alliances and coalitions, for example during the municipal elections of 2014 with success in Grenoble with the PdG against the PS and the PCF; in Ivry with the PCF against the PS, etc.

The problem (for EELV) is that the political crisis of the Left is far from over, and the PCF is not exactly as "dead" as Emmanuel Todd predicted, nor is the PS: they still are able to attract people with a social, democratic, and Green fibre who could easily be members of EELV. The PS has not (yet?) morphed into the Greek Pasok, so EELV + Front de gauche (French left party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon) cannot be Syriza. What's more, Syriza has not found the way out. So, EELV has no other choice but to practice "crisis-time politics", reducing it to questions 1 and 2. That is where it gets tough.

## The Intellectual Crisis

Moving to "crisis-time-politics" mode after 15 years of business as usual (alliances with the left to try to advance as many ecological issues as possible) requires - and that's the trouble - much more thought, hard choices, and daring choices that have to be defended 24/7. That means a lot more energy and brainpower.

Don't be mistaken. Politics is a tricky art. You can get it wrong. I, for one, and for example, voted No to Maastricht and Yes to the Treaty to establish a constitution for the European Union. I did so based on rational thinking: if we want an ecological and social Europe we need to make sure political federalism goes along with or at least catches up to economic unification. Others, who are not idiots, made the opposite choice. That would come down to a different reading of the texts and more importantly of a different "experience" in the way that the text triggers implementation. But, well, it was hard (not impossible) to diagnose that the Europe of No (that we currently have) would be both extremely economically liberal and xenophobic.

Things go really wrong when leaders put lipstick on a pig and pass off the labels for what is inside the bottle: as if a candidate for the Socialist party was a socialist and a candidate for the Communist party was a communist. I was extremely naïve when I believed that one became discerning upon growing up and, at the latest, at 25 years old. More importantly, I also thought that being part of a political party meant "trying to be discerning together" through comparative analysis. That has ceased to be the case at EELV.

A veteran who monitored the Greens from the inside until the beginning of the 2000's, and who discretely returned to the circle more recently, said to me during the Lille Summer Days: "The thing that is most striking to me is that the political debate is gone. In 2001, we could see who was really ambitious, but it was always dressed up in skilled political analysis. Today no one is even pretending anymore." That is not entirely accurate: political epithets are

constantly slung at each other. But these labels (leftist! rightist!) are just names: they've replaced all the content. Words are mistaken for things, and even vain quarrels could be prevented if they were replaced by content or inquisitiveness.

No one is even asking party members in the regions and in the municipalities or members of parliament to explain what exactly they are planning to advance by way of ecology, democracy, solidarity or other principles by forging an alliance. It is all just a question of a game of names: hold onto this city, that department, or keep this region, "for the left." The time is not even taken to make a distinction between a left that is ecologically-compatible and a left that would not be. "Governmentalists" are not required to explain what they plan to negotiate in exchange for entering a governing coalition: did the 2012 contract, for example, require halting six nuclear reactors? Proportionality? Notre Dame des Landes? Don't know - and they couldn't care less.

This collapse of the political discussion obviously reflects the general French context, scrutinised since the 1990s by foreign researchers in French studies. Sudhir Hazareesingh's latest book, "How the French Think" sums up quite well the diagnosis: "Inward-looking and reductive."

Does anyone fail to realise that this atrophy has become, amongst the main mediators of EELV, a weapon in advancing their concept of "policy-making"? In other words, the pure and simple quest for/and holding onto jobs. Cécile Duflot, Jean Vincent Placé, Emmanuelle Cosse (leaders until now of the EELV machine) inter alia could not care less about the consequences on the economy, the environment, or French society. Decisive votes - such as on the TSCG (Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the European Union) and the CICE (French acronym for Tax Credit for Competitiveness and Employment) - are emblematic of their placid indifference to economic reasoning. When economically savvy individuals like Pascal Canfin and Eva Sas (French Greens MPs) make energetic appeals to set aside the economic consequences in the interest of staying in "power", it is not difficult to conclude that ignorance on the subject is not what is at play.

## The Moral Crisis

This is the substance of the problem: a policy based on obtaining and holding onto positions has completely overtaken policy of substance. The illegitimate heirs of the 2009 success of the party showed far too much cynicism to public opinion as early as 2010, and in doing so they have completely discredited Europe-Écologie- Les Verts.

And now again, let us be clear, that is precisely one of the lessons of the experience and in particular of the plural majority of 1997. In order to implement a content-based-agreement, positions must be held. To paraphrase Blaise Pascal: "Substance-based policy, without actually holding positions, is tantamount to powerlessness; a policy of holding a position without substance is immoral."

Without proportional representation, agreements must be struck in the first round of elections. This puts the PS in a position to choose who is to be elected. Then, the Greens who have been elected - based on their moral compass and career path calculations - will make a decision about meekly following the PS or to breaking away.

Again, it is advisable to be careful with this point: this is not just a question of the "morality" of one person or another. The EELV moral crisis stems from the fact that many activists subscribe to this leader behaviour or at least tolerate it as if it were an inevitable law of human nature. Activists and party members have the leadership they deserve. Those who take issue are shunned or leave without a fight. Or they resign by legitimism. This was common in the French Communist party, making it impossible for the party to "renew" or "rebuild".

It would therefore be useless to blame a Stalinian leader for allegedly spoiling what was a fundamentally healthy party by imposing an oligarchy: "The Firm". The Firm reigned (until it tore itself to pieces) because the masses of mid-level managers of the party - the deputy mayors and vice-presidents of the executives on the "left", which were not better than those in government, eventually got cosy in their positions despite the best intentions in the world (even just a mere two terms prior) to "do something" and enact the content of the agreements.

Of course, there was a generational aspect to things, in two senses. Just as in the French intellectual milieu, current political generations were formed in a post-ideological context, where the individual quest for employment got the upper hand on the collective quest for progress. Moreover, the "pioneers" of a movement do not behave like the heirs to the movement. In 1970-1980, the founders of Political ecology were usually young university students or managers from civil service who put their careers on the line to take up the cause of underrepresented - even derided - ideologies such as feminism or environmentalism. They acted out of idealism, or out of concern for their children, or for the community, or because of intellectual curiosity. However, it must be said that professionally, they would, at most, sacrifice higher management positions, but not their jobs, which were secured. Twenty years later, those who joined this "established" Green party, were able to exchange the positions in the party they had acquired through in-house manoeuvring for paid positions in public or para-public administration.

The case in point is really that it was easy for journalists to see what the first generation "embodied." Today, it would be a challenge to determine what exactly the characters of the Firm - who are busy tearing each other apart - embody. The problem is that - contrary to what took place in 2001-2002 when the "appetite for green" was still very great - we opened the door in 2009, when the feeling of impending doom meant the arrival in Europe-Écologie of the likes of Jean Vincent Placé and Cécile Duflot. Nonetheless, the jobs-based politics quickly overtook all else, catapulting some of the "newcomers" from the oligarchy.

Shall we expect, with the arrival of a new generation, a bounce like we saw in 2002 or 2009? Might we hope that, one day, the "rebuilders" will be able to achieve the intellectual and moral reboot effort for long enough to mean that representatives will be able to play a useful role in institutions, contribute to saving the Planet, and mending a frayed society? Will they be able to rally those who were once lost to the sirens of the oligarchy?

Of course I firmly believe that they will be able to achieve this. How else could it be? How could I possibly believe that politics can save the planet and yet maintain that the demise of political ecology and its leaders is "inevitable"?

A text that seems to unite Ecologists and anti-globalisation activists enthusiastically states: "The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home." (Encyclical *Laudato si'*)

Naive? Let us not forget the following statements on which I shall conclude. I shall let the readers the task of determining the authors of the utterances: "When it comes to political hate, only the last layer counts" and "I forgive all those who have offended me, but I keep the list."