



CLIMATE ACTIVISM AND THE CHALLENGES OF A DEMOCRATIC AND JUST TRANSITION IN EUROPE (AND BEYOND)

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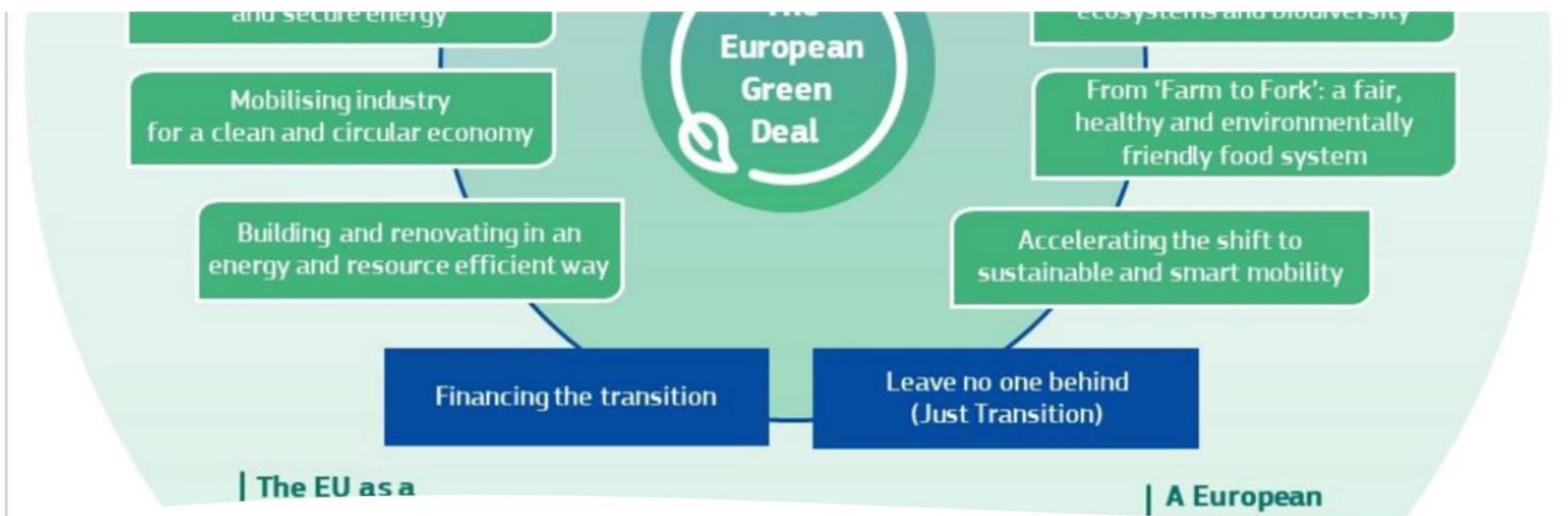
OVERVIEW

Just transition in Europe – context

What's this got to do with activism?

- The environmental movement: a historical overview
- Environmental/Climate justice movement today:
 - Political discourses of environmental justice
 - The original thinking around a 'just transition'

Current streams or currents in climate protest (with a focus on Europe)



The European Green Deal

- Communication (COM(2019) 640 of 11 December 2019).
- 'It is a new **growth strategy** that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where **economic growth is decoupled from resource use**.'
- 'It also aims to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts. At the same time, this **transition must be just and inclusive**.'

INTRODUCTION TO THE JUST TRANSITION MECHANISM (JTM)

Purpose: Ensures a fair transition to a climate-neutral economy, supporting affected regions.

Funding: Mobilises around €55 billion (2021–2027) to mitigate socio-economic impacts.

Three Pillars:

- **Just Transition Fund:** €27 billion (€19.7 billion EU + €7.3 billion national co-financing).
- **InvestEU "Just Transition" Scheme:** Mobilizes €10–15 billion in private investments.
- **Public Sector Loan Facility:** Combines €1.3 billion EU grants with €6–8 billion EIB loans, mobilizing €13.3–15.3 billion.

IMPLEMENTATION AND BENEFITS

Territorial Just Transition Plans: Define territories and challenges, setting development goals by 2030.

Just Transition Platform: Provides technical support and promotes best practices.

Beneficiaries:

- **People and Citizens:** Employment opportunities, re-skilling, energy-efficient housing.
- **Companies and Sectors:** Support for low-carbon technologies and economic diversification.
- **Member States and Regions:** Transition to low-carbon activities, job creation, and infrastructure investments.

WAVES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Wave 1 – advocacy oriented

- Conservationism
- From late 1800s
- Romanticism and 'wild' nature
- Fortress approaches and colonial displacements



Wave 2 – protest oriented

- Peace and conservation
- Linked to New Left/68 wave
- Anti-nuclear, pro-peace
- Epitomised in Greenpeace



Wave 3 – advocacy oriented

- Sustainable development
- End of Cold War and symbiotic relations between big NGOs and development of global environmental governance



Wave 4 – protest-oriented

- Environmental justice
- Disappointment in multilateralism
- Bridges to grassroots, indigenous, racism, and global justice
- Increased repression





THE FIRST WAVE – CONSERVATIONIST

Campaigns to save and conserve species and found national parks – late 19th Century. Begins with something akin to NGOs, not a 'movement wave'.

Romanticism – defend the inherent beauty of Nature..

First big example the foundation of Yellowstone in the US.

Problematic in a colonial view – known as a 'fortress conservation' approach

- Displacement of local populations
- Not always the best thing for protecting Nature!
- Continues to be debated today: securitization of conservation, etc.
- E.g. Survival International frame it like this:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO2Ey-Bka5s&t=133s>



THE SECOND WAVE

Linked to the '68 wave: environment and peace themes come together:

- Use of Napalm in the Vietnam war, one of the first occasions where New Left peace movements emerged;
- Nuclear testing – clear link to the Cold War backdrop.

Greenpeace is the best known illustration of this second wave of environmentalism!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jDMjfSU-uE>

In the meantime, environment appears on the global governance agenda in the 1970s (1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment – Stockholm – not that this is around the same time as the Helsinki Accords finalized in 1975).



THE 'THIRD WAVE'

Environment has become a clear focus for global politics: the Rio Treaties of 1992.

The continued rise of NGOs carrying out environmental projects, and advocacy in different arenas – continued exploitation of opportunities suited to NGOs in line with:

- Discourse of sustainable development etc.
- General opening to global civil society after the end of the Cold War: more funding, civil society as service provision, project-based approaches, links with democratization.

Very clear in the turn to partnership approaches with NGOs at the turn of the millennium:

- 2000 to 2001 a number of UN resolutions were passed on the importance of 'global partnerships' for 'pursing development and poverty eradication'.
- Transnational governance experiments in the field of environmental policy.



THE FOURTH WAVE: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Convergence of grassroots struggles, informal networks with movement groups of different types in the global North (via Global Justice Movement) and eventually (and with more difficulty) with more advocacy-oriented NGOs.

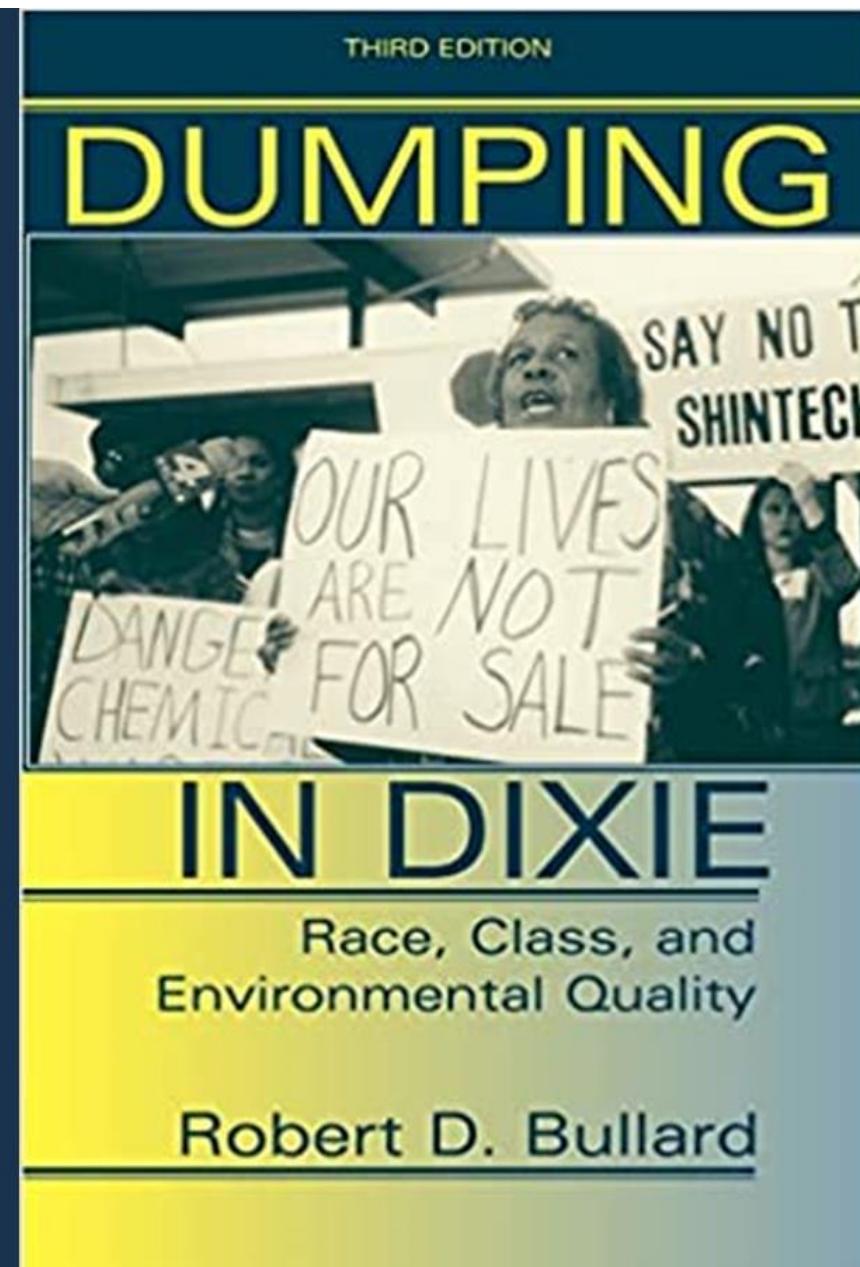
- Convergence of both political discourses and movement struggles (blurred boundaries).

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

History in the US in particular: term coined by civil rights leader Reverend Benjamin Chavis in case of the siting of a landfill for dangerous chemicals following a spill in 1978.

Theorized in scholarship by Robert D. Bullard: "any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race."

Convergence of questions of civil rights and environment.



ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR

Clear overlaps with environmental racism but more international and more linked to economic goods and bads (international political economy)

- the “unequal distribution of ecological goods and evils resulting from economic growth” ([EJOLT](#))

Often interlinked with specific justice issues – access to resources, independence and self-determination – linked to post-colonial discourses and activism.

Located by Martinez-Alier in the planetary limits and entropy view: infrastructure and other projects understood as damaging to local communities even if seen as useful to e.g. transition elsewhere in the world.

Examples: [Chipko movement](#), anti-extraction campaigning, against dam construction etc.





DEGROWTH

Linked to consumption – degrowth rejects the possibility of decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts as a fiction;

Therefore we need ‘a voluntary, democratically negotiated, equitable downscaling of societies’ physical throughput until it reaches a sustainable steady-state’ Büchs & Koch 2019: 155).

This is about our **wellbeing**. Schneider et al (2010: 511): an ‘equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term’.

GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Battle of Seattle – 1999 protests against the WTO unite a range of NGOs, SMOs, both institutionalised and radical.

Transnational protests become commonplace at IO meetings: Gothenburg, Genoa..

Meeting of groups from across the world and across the movement/NGO divide

First World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2001



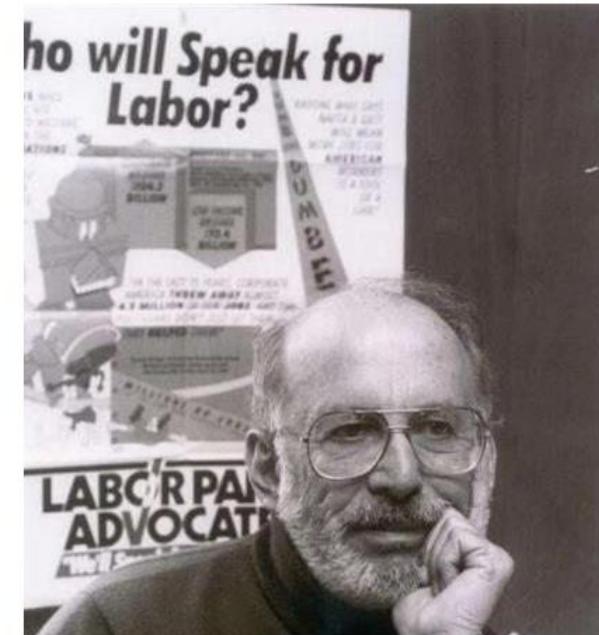
JUST TRANSITION IN THE US LABOUR MOVEMENT AND BEYOND

A term originally coined in the North American labour movement to move beyond a false dichotomy between environmental protection and job availability and security.

In its original version aims to address the social impacts of decarbonization by ensuring equitable sharing of costs and benefits.

Moves to international level (ILO, Paris Agreement) through trade union activism.

Term adopted by other struggles, e.g. Indigenous Peoples. A parallel story with Environmental Justice.



ENVIRONMENTAL (OR CLIMATE) JUSTICE

The social movement and political discourse that brings much of this together:

‘concerned with the degree to which the environmental risks generated by industrial society fall most heavily on the poor and ethnic minorities’.

Distills three central and interdependent elements:

- Recognitional justice (understanding and engaging with diverse viewpoints and knowledge systems);
- Procedural justice (fair participation);
- Distributive justice (equitable sharing of benefits and costs).

Currently the uniting ‘frame’ of social movements for justice and the environment.





‘THE’ CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT |

Focus on example of the
EU

Mass protest

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- After disillusion in international summits, climate protests began to be organised at international summits (the start of the current cycle of climate activism).
- The impacts of those protests looked limited: protests began to shift to the national/local level, also in line with a focus on justice.
- The peak of these protests was in 2019, and a key group Fridays for Future.
- FfF called for national governments to **act in line with science** to achieve climate and **intergenerational justice** and increasingly for **system change not climate change**.
- Other protest groups called for more radical system change (e.g. degrowth).



Disruptive activism

••• FROM EXTINCTION REBELLION TO THE LAST GENERATION

- Around the peak of mass protest, the UK group Extinction Rebellion formed against the same backdrop of questions about the effects of mass protest at international level
- XR used civil disobedience strategies as well as taking part in mass protests: e.g. die-ins, rebellions of one. They target governments and authorities but also fossil fuel industry.
- A core demand from XR has always been to hold and respect Citizens' Assemblies on climate and ecological justice.

→ Terminology of urgency on climate: declaration of emergencies

→ The rise of other civil disobedience groups is noteworthy since XR: e.g. The last generation, Just Stop Oil.



XR AND CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

01

TELL THE TRUTH

All institutions must communicate the danger we are in. We must be clear about the extreme cascading risks humanity now faces, the injustice this represents, its historic roots, and the urgent need for rapid political, social and economic change.

02

ACT NOW

Every part of society must act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025 and begin protecting and repairing nature immediately. The whole of society must move into a new precautionary paradigm, where life is sacred and all are in service to ensuring its future.

03

DECIDE TOGETHER

We demand a culture of participation, fairness and transparency. The Government must create and be led by a Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice. Only the common sense of ordinary people will help us navigate the challenging decisions ahead.





Everyday Activism

CREATING CHANGE FROM THE BOTTOM UP?

- A very broad category of groups which organise autonomously to fulfil social, economic, and cultural needs in ecologically sound ways and outside (to different degrees) of normal governance.
- From 'food banks and community gardens via collaborative housing and social centres to recycling networks and repair cafes' (Blühdorn and Deforian 2021).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ARE PART OF CIVIL SOCIETY

- IN LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY, 'CIVIL SOCIETY' UNDERSTOOD AS A VERY WIDE RANGE OF GROUPS IS SEEN AS CRUCIAL TO:
- HOLD STATES / AUTHORITIES TO ACCOUNT
- BRING THE VOICES OF CITIZENS AND SOCIETAL INTERESTS TO THE ATTENTION OF DECISION-MAKERS
- PREVENT THE STATE FROM OVERSTEPPING ITS AUTHORITY
- Activism, protest, etc. is part of the history of European states and the construction of democracy itself. It's not just normal, it's crucial!

John Leech Sketch from Punch

Great Chartist Demonstration 8



Martin Luther King, Jr., at the March on Washington

Martin Luther King, Jr. (centre), with other members of the American civil rights movement at the March on Washington, D.C., in August 1963.

Image: AP Images

) ANYTHING

Impacts of climate activism on European decision-making

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Agenda, policy and access impacts:

- Moving climate change up the European policy agenda.
- Mass protests were cited as one reason for the European Green Deal.
- New spaces for dialogue were created by the EU AND increasing recognition and encouragement of CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES (AND CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES)
 - Some examples: Governance Regulation; **Just Transition Plans**
- Everyday activism: the European Climate Pact, Energy Communities..



CHALLENGES |



ACTIVISM AGAINST CLIMATE ACTION, ACTION AGAINST CLIMATE ACTIVISM

A tangled story:

- Activism against transition projects beyond EU borders e.g. critical minerals extraction
- Activism in Europe against elements of the European Green Deal: e.g. farmers' protests (picture: Reuters)
- Links between activism against some types of policy by right-wing populist and far-right political parties and views of conservation without attention to justice and democracy.

Plus:

- Increasing moves to curb civil disobedience in climate activism through legislation for heavy punishments.



IS CLIMATE CHANGE SLIPPING OFF THE AGENDA?

WHAT DOES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REALLY MEAN – AND CAN IT BE ACHIEVED?

HOW CAN ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP BE A PART OF BUILDING NEW IDEAS AND APPROACHES?

Some final thoughts...