PARTY-BUILDING FOR ECO-SOCIALISTS: LESSONS FROM THE FAILED PROJECT OF THE GERMAN GREENS

FRIEDER OTTO WOLF

In the early 1980s an emblematic event took place in Hamburg, in the north of Germany: after decades of silence about the poisoning of workers and the environment by dioxins and furans, which had been on-going in a local chemical factory, some workers’ wives, whose husbands were suffering from the early stage of chlorate acne, the ‘Seveso illness’, phoned the Hamburg office of the newly-founded ‘Green Alternative List’ (later to become the Hamburg branch of the German Green Party), to say that ‘things could not go on like this: their husbands selling their health to the company, leaving them with the prospect of being housewives nursing the sick and, later on, early widowhood – the new party should do something about this!’.

All the elements were there which had constituted the hopes and dreams of the new political formation under construction: working class radicalism, a concern with the ecological destruction caused by capitalist big industry, a feminist dimension – and the possibility of party-building opening new terrains of struggle. This was clearly not the middle-class environmentalism of the well-to-do, with the leisure and leeway to be concerned about a romanticized nature. This seemed to be the germ of a renewed anti-capitalism coming out of everyday struggles, tapping the combined potential of working class, ecological and feminist movements to reach a higher level of radical politicization, culminating in the building of a new type of party – i.e. a new start for anti-systemic politics in the metropolis comparable only to the rise in the 1890s of the Second International out of the cinders of the First. And this was happening in Germany, where the ruin of the nation-state, the self-inflicted demise of German imperialism, and the historical failure of Stalinism, symbolized by the Berlin wall, seemed to have brought about a deep break with traditional politics, and where the student and youth rebellion of
PARTY-BUILDING FOR ECO-SOCIALISTS

311

the 1960s, starting especially in West Berlin, had begun to ‘revolutionize’ a traditionally authoritarian culture.

A quarter of a century later, all this seems to have been a pipe-dream. From 2002 to 2005 the German Greens were a party of a government in a reunited Germany vying for international respectability by sharing a renewed ‘white man’s burden’ by sending troops to Kosovo, to Afghanistan, and, soon, to the Congo, or by sending its navy to participate in the ‘anti-terrorist’ controls around the horn of Africa. The ‘humanitarian interventionism’ of NATO against Serbia was legitimized by a majority of former radical pacifists; and a debt guarantee has been given to the nuclear industry in Germany by former radical ecologists and anti-nuclear activists. German Green parliamentarians have been avidly implementing neo-liberal ‘reforms’, in coalition with a social-democratic party in which a translated Blairism has won the day. After the federal election of fall 2005 was lost by their social-democratic partner, some leading Green parliamentary representatives began discussing joining a centre-right coalition government. Within the (very much weakened) social movements of contemporary Germany, the example of the Greens is cited in order to refute any idea of intervening in party politics at all. Their negative example is actually important in reinforcing prejudices against a new German left party which is in the process of being formalized, after an impressive first presence in the 2005 federal elections.

Can anything be learnt from the Greens’ failure? Apart from the simple statement that there is no better way of learning strategically than from the analysis of past defeats and failures, there are some specific lessons to be drawn from this historical experience (which for this author is also quite personal). And as we shall see, these lessons are of considerable relevance to contemporary international left debates on party-building.

THE ROOTS OF THE GERMAN GREENS

It was a surprise to many that in the wake of the worldwide youth rebellion of the 1960s wherever the spontaneous initiatives of the ‘new wave’ of radical opposition could not be crushed, party building came high on the agenda. It is useful to distinguish two reasons for this unexpected turn by people who had seemed mere ‘hippies’ or ‘culture rebels’ a few years before. In fact, they are profoundly different reasons, although customarily lumped together: one is the problem of organizing the practice of a multitude so that it can reach out beyond the urban middle-class bohemian milieu and challenge established power relations; the other problem is how to participate effectively in electoral politics, the central mechanism of the reproduction of these power relations. The traditional left had, in fact, developed two distinct ways of
connecting the two. On the one hand, by creating a comprehensive and well-organized working-class counter-culture, linking everyday life to ‘the party’ by a sense of class loyalty; and, on the other hand, by linking ‘legal front’ organizations to the more cadre-type organizations of political professionals (first developed by the European left in the post-1848 repression, then cultivated by the SPD against Bismarck’s persecution in the early 1890s, and systematized by Lenin in his ideas on a ‘new type of party’). By the 1960s both these linkages had ceased to function: the first, because the mass culture of capitalist ‘consumerism’ had started to dissolve distinct working class cultures; the second, because universal suffrage and the liberal ‘rule of law’ had made open persecution almost impracticable, even though more indirect ways of discrimination and political exclusion continued to be commonplace. The parties of the old left in Europe were all becoming mere electoral machines, with no more programmatic or organizational foundation than was indispensable for electoral survival. In the West German SPD, which by the 1960s was well on its way to transforming itself definitively into an electoral party, this meant that the local ‘Ortsverein’, the traditional organizational backbone of the party responsible for integrating all kinds of social democratic organizations, lost its importance as an arena of political debate and decisions.

But it was not the question of organization that necessarily led to party building. All kinds of local coordinating initiatives sprang up from the late 1960s onwards, using autonomous ‘centres’ for youth or for women, and networking by repeated conferences on overarching issues like those of peace and ecology. This was soon reinforced, however, by the extension of the cultural rebellion of the 1960s to working-class youth, including apprentices and migrant workers, whose new militancy raised the practical problem of how to go beyond the capacity to organize wildcat strikes so as also to organize opposition within the trade unions, as well as in local politics. In spite of some emphasis on Luxemburgian and ‘council communist’ spontaneism (at the beginning of the 1970s a small journal in West Berlin ran with the slogan of ‘social emancipation is not a party affair’), the focus of the debate on organization rapidly switched from grassroots organizing to a theoretical (and practical) rehearsal of Lenin’s, Stalin’s, Trotsky’s and Mao’s contributions on the problems of the construction of a revolutionary mass party.

As was clear to everybody involved at the time, the initiative in the 1960s rebellion had not come from the working class, let alone from its political parties. Instead students and young workers created a number of competing organizations oriented to ‘rebuilding’ the working-class party (the old ones having been ‘betrayed’ by their social-democratic or Stalinist leaders). This turned out to be rather unproductive – leading neither to a significant pres-
ence in the working class, nor to really innovative forms of organization, but rather tending to reproduce old forms of organizing that had long been rendered obsolete by the development of the technologies of communication (copying machines, telefax, and the computer) and transport (the spread of private car ownership), which facilitated travelling long distances by hitchhiking.

There was also of course the development of a grassroots activism using violent means (taken up by self-styled ‘urban guerrilla’ groups, most notoriously the RAF in Germany, modelled upon the national liberation struggles in the Third World, and similar to the brigate rosse in Italy or the GRAPO in Spain); much to the unease of grassroots activists and networks, which continued to predominate in actual everyday practice, even after having lost their hegemony in the field of political ideologies. The public defeat of such violent activism had become patent to all sectors of society by the fall of 1977, and after their political isolation all kinds of urban guerrilla groups were successfully repressed by a modernized police force. This defeat, however, did not coincide with a decrease of grassroots militancy as such: most parts of a broadly radicalized youth continued on more localized and programmatically ‘non-violent’ paths of resistance for almost another decade. This deeply changed the focus of the ‘organization debate’ in Germany from the building of a more or less conspiratorial vanguard to a question of mass politics. And here, at first, and mainly locally, the electoral process and existing forms of institutionalized politics came into view.

THE GERMAN GREEN PARTY: AN OVERVIEW

Before developing more systematic lines of argument, some empirico-historical narrative is required to remind the reader of what we are concretely talking about. From 1976 to the mid-1980s the Greens emerged as a parliamentary force in the Federal Republic of Germany, developing out of a series of local and regional electoral initiatives, calling themselves green, alternative, multicoloured or citizens’ lists and trying to translate the everyday concerns of the new social movements into political representation. This broad ‘electoral movement’ regrouped mostly activists from the ‘Basisgruppen’, the different regional variants of the short-lived Maoist organizations, both having emerged from the student movement, with tactically co-opted ‘notables’, some of whom had right-wing backgrounds. This was far more decisive for the emergence of the party than the more or less ‘putschist’ attempts to occupy its political space from above (as represented by Gruhl’s Grüne Aktion Zukunft, or the initiative around Petra Kelly for a green list of candidates for the European elections of 1979). The founding party congress
of 1980 achieved a precarious unity of ‘green’ and ‘alternative’ forces, with strong principles of grass roots democracy as a guarantee against anybody ‘centralizing’ power. The much publicized problem of a right wing presence within the Greens (sometimes presented as if the new party had rendered obsolete the left-right divide) turned out to be largely non-existent, as most of the activists who had not come directly from the overarching broadly left-wing peace and ecology movements of the period had gained their previous political experience in political grass-roots initiatives, which had included dissident young socialists or young liberals.

But after their entry into the Bundestag in 1983 the opposition between left and right, between ‘red’ and ‘green’ ceased to play any political role within the German Greens. Instead, the strategic debate within the party now opposed a minority of ‘Realos’ (realists), who advanced a strategy of full parliamentary participation with the aim of forming a coalition government with the social democrats, to a majority of so-called ‘Fundis’ (fundamentalists) who treated parliamentary strategy more in terms of provoking a crisis of government, in which some of them saw a chance of using their parliamentary presence to drive bargains in return for supporting minority governments (this became known as the ‘toleration strategy’). The entire process was accompanied by a high-profile debate within the broader German new left – from the Bahro conference in 1979 to the ensuing Socialist Conferences in 1980-81 – partly resulting in the attempt to establish a green-left monthly ‘Moderne Zeiten’ (1981-1984) which brought together a considerable number of future green leaders.

As the ‘Fundis’ were losing a clear strategic orientation from the mid-1980s to 1989, the participation of Joschka Fischer in the state government of Hesse (which included practical proof of being able to break an alliance, if needed) increased the credibility of the Realo strategy. This led to a realignment within the Green left. A Left Forum was formed by left municipal and regional pragmatists (who had been ignored by the left leadership while it focused on the Realo-Fundi confrontation), by the adherents of the ‘toleration strategy’ within the ‘Fundis’, and by a group of ex-Trotskyites who had joined the party. The Left Forum concentrated on the content of the policy to be advocated by the greens instead of on the question of government participation as such. Meanwhile, the small ‘Aufbruch’ group, which emerged by pleading for an end to the Fundi-Realo stand-off within the party through pressure ‘from below’, in the end turned out to be one of the spearheads of the introduction of neo-liberal conceptions into the greens, in the guise of libertarianism. In this short phase, which lasted until the first elections in the newly unified Germany, the Left Forum’s hopes for an anticipated coali-
tion agreement with a left-leaning SPD under Oskar Lafontaine seemed to present a productive, although deeply reformist, way out of the crisis of fordism. This was advanced under the general slogan of a new, ‘eco-social’, social compact.

All this was ended by the surprising advent of German unity. From 1990 to 1994, during which time the Fundis left the Green party, the Left Forum, feeling obliged to save the Western party from the ruins of the 1990 elections, made a truce with the Realos, and sought to re-integrate a party ‘family’ now consisting of the West German Green party, the inheritors of the civic movements of the GDR, and the small Eastern green party. Without the presence of the left forces which had abandoned the party – under the leadership of Jutta Ditfurth, who tried in vain to build a competing electoral organization – or who embraced the promise seemingly offered by the ‘westward extension’ of the new PDS which had been formed out of the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party – and with the strong disorientation concerning left alternatives gripping civil society this proved to have been no more than a protracted rearguard action, deferring the final hegemony of the Realo wing for some eight years.

The same must be said for the ‘Babelsberg circle’ and its radical network which managed to keep alive the Green left, reinforced by exponents of the ex-GDR greens until the defeat on the Kosovo question in 1998. It managed, for some time, to stem the tide of neoliberal economic and social policy conceptions within the greens, and it has been able to formulate a political pacifism capable of underling a realistically radical green foreign policy, while keeping and developing the international contacts with other left green and alternative forces in Europe. Already, in the moment of forming of the first Red-Green government, in 1998, the influence of Joschka Fischer and his Realos turned out to be dominant – mostly within the parliamentary group, although they were forced to observe at least a semblance of parity with the green left. In the end, however, the green left has lost to the combination of Realo tactics and media propaganda supporting militarist ‘humanitarian interventionism’ (in the name of antifascism).

Since 1998 the Realo wing, together with a governmental left group led by ministers and federal or European parliamentarians, has been leading the German Greens to produce the results quoted in the beginning of this essay. They have no chance of replacing the Liberal Party as the lynchpin of the German party system. As they still represent a significant segment of the electorate – the social professionals, and the age cohort of the old new social movements – it is not to be expected that they will vanish. But they are being faced with a new parliamentary challenge – because in the emerging
new German five-party system it will be largely their decision whether a right-wing alliance can have a parliamentary majority (comprising liberals, conservatives, and greens), or whether a left coalition is formed (left party, social-democrats, and greens), or whether a ‘grand coalition’ avoiding any such decisions will again be formed.

**PROBLEMATIC EXPLANATIONS**

I shall not review the ample literature on the integration of the German Greens into the dominant political constellation, most of which has nothing to do with any perspective of emancipatory transformation. Instead, I shall try to discuss typical explanations and arguments running through this literature, or through public debates in Germany, that pertain to the historical failure of the West German Greens as a political force opening up an historical alternative to the existing constellation of capitalist domination, i.e. *its failure as a project for an emancipatory transformation*. There are two kinds of trouble with existing explanations in this sense. On the one hand, they tend to mis-describe the existing situation out of which an alternative path of historical change has been sought. Instead of analyzing it in terms of unresolved contradictions, the resolution of which is driven by historical struggles, they assume a totally determined state of affairs which does not admit any real alternatives – no bifurcations, just an onward march of history (or of the reproduction of the biosphere). On the other hand, they seem to oscillate between explaining too much, and explaining too little: they are either referring to very broad structural explanations – e.g. the statism implicit in the very form of the political party or the deformations involved in trying to participate in the government of a leading ‘imperialist’ country – which, if they were true, would imply the absolute impossibility of using the party form as an instrument of liberation; or they imply the impossibility of any gradualist transformation in such a country.

The type of explanation most current within the Marxist Left combines the two errors in an almost inextricable way, seeing green activists (or the electorate or the party builders) as possessing the wrong kind of ‘essence’, in terms of class, gender, race or societal location. Just because of their being ‘petty bourgeois’, male-heterosexual, white or ‘Northern’ the rebellion and opposition of the greens will never be more than a show, leading, in the very end, to a reinforced dependency on the existing structures of domination. In so far as class essence is stressed in this explanation (which derives from political and intellectual sources that should not be underestimated), it badly mis-describes the prevailing situation. This is because it unduly reduces the class of people exploited by capital to a certain historical type of industrial
manual workers, whereas many indicators show that the ‘green pool’ of activists, voters and party builders represent the more modern segments of the working class exploited by capital, supplemented by public workers employed by the state. If it is considered in terms of gender and age composition this green pool may indeed seem more representative of the actually existing working class than the more traditional social-democratic or communist electorate.

There is, to be sure, the real problem of the expanding categories of ‘precarious’ and ‘flexible’ workers which poses a real challenge to all possible class politics. It would be an illusion, however, to think that these new types of workers are less accessible to green politics than the communist or social-democratic ‘pools’; and the ‘green pool’, has at least the advantage of a more feminized gender composition and of less normalized types of employment. There are, of course, profound differences of perspective between those who enjoy real, self-controlled ‘flexibility’ at the upper reaches of employment hierarchies, and those exposed to the other-controlled ‘precariousness’ to which the low-level tiers of the hierarchy are exposed, as well as the emerging new ‘under-classes’.

On the whole, the important issue of the changes in the ‘class composition’ of wage labourers exploited by capital is unduly side-stepped in such an approach, as well as the real problems of determining the relative weight of the processes of indirect exploitation of unpaid labour or the directly violent expropriation of workers in the dependent countries of global capitalism. But in any case, the assumption that the young and better-educated sections of the population in the metropolitan centres can be written off as having no motive or capacity for any serious opposition to the existing system – i.e., that only the most destitute segments are capable of this – would imply that the chances of success were very slim indeed. Without overthrowing ‘the system’ with one violent blow – which has never happened and should never be expected – any protracted oppositional struggle will tend to derive its strength more from its capacity to implicate those workers most urgently needed by capital than from just organizing the most destitute, and therefore most desperate segments of the working class.

The most current explanation of the German Greens’ political failure within mainstream social science manages to combine both errors in a remarkably different way. The ‘cycle’ theory of social movements claims that there is a series of phases through which all oppositions must proceed, throughout human history: to begin with, a phase of blunt rebellion; followed by a phase of creative articulation; then a phase of routinization, ideologization and organization, required to constitute a mass basis for the new movements; then
a phase of struggle to assert the place of the new movements in the arenas where power relations within society are determined; then a phase of institutionalization, when the new movement begins to ‘take its seat’ within the constituted ‘places’ of established power; and finally a phase of integration, when the former representatives of the movement are fully co-opted into the established constellation of domination, and the memory of the movement is turned into an ideological source of legitimacy of this new establishment. The empirical and historical bases for such a typology are indeed very broad. And the history of the German Greens may easily be told in a rather convincing way to give this omni-historical truth another striking illustration.

This explanation, in its popular vulgarization, is sometimes couched in terms of a comparison of the ‘green movement’ with Christianity – from the violent radicalism of Jesus and the early Christians via the establishment of churches, canons, and orthodoxies to the established churches linked to state power from Constantine onwards. The Green movement, it is then affirmed in this vein, managed to do in a decade what Christianity had taken half a millennium to realize: the transformation from a radical opposition movement to a part of the established institutions of domination. But this is a clear case of an empty argument: the green movement, although it touches – as any radical movement cannot avoid doing – on the question of the good life, and, in this context, on what is being conceived as spirituality by some, is certainly not a movement of faith, not a religious or millenarian movement.12

A less patently absurd popularization of the ‘cycle’ thesis, however, has been based on the analogy between the green movement and the labour movement – again stressing the relative velocity of development on the side of the greens, who took mere years to arrive at a betrayal of their original radicalism (i.e. 1980-89), whereas the labour movement had taken decades, (from the 1860s to World War I, in the case of the social democrats) or to the Stalinist betrayal of the Bolshevik revolution, in the case of the communists. The problem of this ‘description’ is twofold: on the one hand, it sees something as a ‘betrayal’, i.e. in terms of a subjective category involving individual and collective guilt, which is actually a complex objective historical process. On the other hand, paradoxically, it affirms the unavoidability of the outcome of being reintegrated into the established power structure. In order to be useful at all, such a comparison would have to be based on just the opposite premises: analyzing these processes in their objectivity – maybe even in their tragic ‘entanglement’ – as lived and suffered by its subjective actors, and at the same time looking for their objective indeterminacies, allowing for alternative outcomes and objective ‘bifurcations’.
The central flaw in both arguments is, of course, inductive reasoning: as there has not so far been, in all history up to the present, any durably successful initiative for social emancipation and liberation, it is inferred that such an initiative is impossible. Impossibility cannot, however, be based on this kind of experiential inductivism. What has been defeated or simply failed in the past may work effectively in the future. The interesting question is not whether this type of cyclical development occurs, which cannot really be denied – but to find the explanations and reasons underlying it. Such a theoretical explanation, once found, would in turn make it possible to choose a different path, to avoid certain mechanisms of self-sabotage and to decline programmatic temptations leading to defeat, or to simply giving up the struggle. Such a closer look would also bring out more clearly the particularities and the distinct dynamics of each of the movements, which are systematically covered up by the analogical thinking involved in the ‘cycle’ theory of social movements. More especially, it would call into question the purity of the cyclical phases constructed – e.g. pointing to the ambivalences present within the labour movement since its very beginnings, torn between an Owenite reformism, a Proudhonian libertarianism, a Lassallean statism and the very specific kind of transformative revolutionarism advocated by Marx and Engels. Or, for example, it could highlight the presence of right-wing reactionary forces at the very beginnings of the green movement, and especially within the initiatives bringing it to a party form, well before any cycle of recuperation could possibly have drawn it to the side of the establishment; or the strong presence of municipal pragmatism within these same beginnings, which has always partly subverted the universalizing ideological stances structuring the Green’s public political debates.

There are other more timid explanations which have a more myopic focus, and tend to explain far too little, concentrating as they do only on the immediate political processes within and without the Greens. The incapacity of many of the early left counterparts of the ‘Realo’ current led by Joschka Fischer to define and to implement a coherent strategy was certainly a major weakness. Even more so, as this incapacity was linked to a visceral dislike and refusal of ‘theory’. This was somewhat understandable after the foreseeable failure of an ‘instant revival’ of Marxist theory from its protracted and repressed crisis, and after the elaborate counter-insurgency technologies which presented themselves as scientific theories; hardened intuition and historical experience seemed to offer better guides to action. Untheorized pragmatism, however, is a bad basis for strategic thought, ‘bracketing off’ as it does so many fundamental questions. It may, of course, support a stubborn but well-founded refusal to confuse elaborate arguments (presented, as a rule,
from above) with more pertinent arguments (presented, again as a rule, from below). But it cannot lead to new thinking and structural insights informing a creative new strategy. This weakness of German Greens (which a handful of intellectuals were unable to cure) has not just been a matter of personal incapacities, but points to an unresolved strategic problem the Greens have shared and still do share with the left at large: how to find an adequate relation between practical experience and theoretical articulation.

The same kind of reasoning applies to even more anecdotal levels of explanation. Was it the failure of the ‘fundamentalists’ under the leadership of Jutta Ditfurth to anticipate the defeat at the Neumünster party congress in 1991 of the attempted take-over of the party by an alliance of the Realo wing with a new centre group and the majority of the East German citizens movement, and therefore the Fundis failure to support an alliance of the broad left wing of the party to get rid of this new right wing? Or was it the failure of the Left Forum group led by Ludger Volmer and others not to use that party congress to split or smash a party which was bound to be taken over by its Realo wing sooner or later? Or again, should the same kind of reasoning be applied to the party conference at Bielefeld in 1998, when the small majority in support of Fisher’s ‘bellicose’ stance on Kosovo was facilitated by a few radical pacifists refusing to support an opposition motion less radical than they deemed indispensable? How to pose the right kind of questions here is the main difficulty, and even where it is possible to identify the questions that need to be examined, and even find out the right ways to answer them, the results will be so specific that they will remain unable to teach anything of significance to anyone who did not participate in the original events.

PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

There are, however, at least four other types of explanation for the failure of the German Greens which are interesting and may rightfully claim more attention. The first of these explanations pertains to the inability of the old and the new left to overcome their divisions, so that anti-capitalism became, on the one hand, frozen into obsolete ‘reformist’ or ‘revolutionary’ alternatives; whereas the new, autonomous social movements, on the other hand, tended to defend their autonomy by closing their eyes to the anti-capitalist consequences of their own demands. This has a specific force for explaining the early phases of the German green movement. Links to the labour movement have always been weak, partly caught up in older attempts to revive leftist forms of ‘trade union opposition’, partly hoping for a reconciliation with a trade union leadership which still was staunchly social-democratic. The
self-isolation of the Communist and Maoist parties, as they went through their various crises, and were in any case still wary of accepting as relevant other struggles than that of the white, male, and national industrial worker, also limited the influx and the influence of even independent Marxist intellectuals. And the failure of a handful of eco-socialists, eco-feminists, and socialist feminists to impress the ecological or feminist movements at large further contributed to the Green party’s losing access to all kinds of critical economic culture, not least the Marxist critique of political economy, which had just been reconstructed by leading figures in the 1960s student movements, in a tremendous effort. Their incapacity to join at least in a common debate was decisive for the discursive fragmentation of the alternative and multicoloured movements.

This actually made the green label more attractive for the new party, although a majority of its activists participated in the more socialist alternative part of the so-called ‘electoral movement’. But the limitations of this were then seen in the consecutive failures to construct a space for theoretical debate in the party, where an eco-socialist current would not have to reduce itself to questions of day-to-day tactics and strategy. It may also have contributed to the fateful strategic decision of the greater part of the left green leadership in 1983 to stop playing a game of left vs. right wing, and instead begin to play the fundi-realo game – which they spectacularly lost in the end. The immediate consequence of the left’s change of strategy had been the trashing of their own theoretical manifesto, originally conceived before this turn, and the loss to the Realo wing of the municipal pragmatists, mostly coming from far left organizations of the 1970s.

A second useful explanation is one which starts from the general crisis of the left, especially in the context of the downfall of the Soviet model of state socialism, which has, in fact, sapped the credibility of all kinds of radical emancipatory alternatives to the present constellation of global domination. This has a specific bearing for the alternative left in West Germany, and, therefore, for the West German Greens. At least since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, if not since the workers’ uprising in the GDR in 1953, German communism had lost its credibility with the masses as well as with most intellectuals. The building of the Berlin wall in 1961 had fortified the impression that an alternative left should be built only in West Germany and in West Berlin – one which would in no way rely upon the Eastern bloc and its political representatives. At the same time, it was expected that the coexistence of the Cold War blocs would continue indefinitely, or at least for the foreseeable future. As a consequence, the Soviet bloc was certainly not seen as an Alternative (this is why in the West Rudolf Bahro’s spectacular publication
was not a surprise in its substance). Yet the Soviet bloc, while certainly not seen as an ally, was seen as a countervailing power capable putting of some pressure on the bloc one was living and struggling in – pressure which could at least be used to obtain political gains for one’s own agenda. As such, however, Soviet-style communism was no longer considered really interesting by the alternative left in West Germany (it was only discussed by a tiny number of specialists), so they were deeply unprepared for the fall of the ‘Berlin wall’, and unable to build connections rapidly with the democratic left ‘over there’. They were incapable of compensating for the ensuing loss of political leverage, and short of arguments against the propaganda wave proclaiming the ‘end of socialism’ along with the ‘end of history’. This was repeated, although on a smaller scale, within the German Greens after the unification of Germany. A double party unification process led first to the absorption of the small green party of the GDR, which was integrated with the western Green party left to form the ‘Babelsberg circle’ as a new radical umbrella network; and then to the negotiated fusion with the ‘Bündnis 90’ group from East Germany’s ‘civic movements’ – which had the effect of strongly reinforcing the party’s right wing.

A third explanation that is worth paying attention to is based on the crisis of fordism. This is used to explain specifically the sudden ascendancy of central tenets of neo-liberal economics within the Realo wing after the late 1980s, starting from the notions of ‘sustainable fiscal policy’ and ‘generational justice’ discovered by municipal Realos in Frankfurt. This is also used to explain why the ideologies of the opposition against fordism seem to have lost most of their biting power, so that after the system had been deconstructed by neo-liberal interventions towards a ‘market capitalism’, it shed all kinds of politically imposed fetters that had been powerful under fordism. Green concerns about ‘big business, big labour, and big government’ reaching class compromises at the expense of environmental interests seemingly vanished into thin air; now the market place alone, without any extraneous power intervening, mediated interests of all kinds. This may seem intuitively quite acceptable to people without a solid left culture or direct personal experience of capitalist exploitation, who may assume that all pre-existing power relations would disappear in acts of market exchange, and who are attracted by the idea that the market puts some sort of real liberty into the hands of the consumer and the citizen to express their respective preferences. Both assumptions are, of course, faulty: capitalist markets are in fact constituted by power relations that are far deeper than those visible at the rather superficial levels of monopolization or cartelization; nor do these relations vanish under the light weight of a mere declaration of market equality, that is limited, any-
way, to the postulate of one dollar, one unit of power, and not extended to any equality between people. But in the context of the crisis of fordism, such ideas had real appeal, and not only among the Greens.

A fourth explanation of some import relates to the effects on the Greens of the apparent abolition of the German nation state having been brought to a sudden end by the unification of 1989/1990. The appeal of a post-national ‘moment’, which had been strong in West Germany’s young generation before German unity, rapidly became a tangible possibility, and then a reality, has been lost after German unification. This unexpected turn of history immediately prevented a red-green constellation under Oskar Lafontaine from winning the elections against Chancellor Helmut Kohl, whose defeat had until then seemed certain. Both the red and the green side of the alliance lamented losing an election they had been certain to win, but it happened partly because the two sides were at loggerheads over the re-emerging ‘national question’. Oskar Lafontaine antagonized the majority of the East Germans by calling into question the monetary integration which was the main engine of Kohl’s unification strategy; and the Greens proved their non-German focus by campaigning blatantly with the central slogan of ‘Everyone talks about Germany, we talk about the weather!’ In the elections following Kohl’s historic success, the West German Greens failed to pass the 5 per cent barrier, losing their representation in the federal parliament, while the East German alliance of civic movements and greens just scraped enough votes together to get into parliament.

There is a fifth explanation that demands consideration, and this pertains to a more general crisis of politics in an age of the spectacle where the media tend to over-determine everything else. But this is often the starting-point of many contributions to party-building discussions on the left today, and we will consider it below, placing the experience of the German Greens in the context of those debates, and trying to discern some lessons that may be relevant to them.

**LESSONS FOR PARTY-BUILDING TODAY**

The first lesson may sound trivial, indeed, but it should not be underestimated: it is simply that any initiative from below which does not succeed in displacing the existing constellation of domination by a revolutionary transformation will be used by this constellation as an impetus towards a ‘passive revolution’, granting a new lease of life to itself. This should, of course, not be invoked to stop revolutionary initiatives ‘from below’ simply in order to avoid ‘recuperation’ from above. But it is certainly true, and verified by the now historical experience of the West German Greens, that ‘only a freely
evolving praxis of participation can mobilize the imagination and bring together the innumerable points at which anti-capitalist struggle originates’ as Joel Kovel has vividly argued in his blueprint for ‘the eco-socialist party and its victory’.\textsuperscript{15} As, however, this was more or less exactly the idea underlying the ‘multicoloured’ and ‘alternative’ line within the West German Greens, the question has to be asked why it has shown so little resistance to being drawn into a process of ‘parliamentarization’ which led to the Greens ‘defining themselves as a progressive populism within the framework of bourgeois democracy’ and therefore ‘solidifying as a kind of intermediate formation that stops considerably short of what is needed for transformation’.\textsuperscript{16}

Kovel rightly stresses the importance of party-building: ‘…only a “party-like” formation that postulates a goal common to all struggles without constraining them from above can organize this into “solidarity solidified” and press towards power’.\textsuperscript{17} Relying upon a mere fluid network, such as that recently postulated by John Holloway,\textsuperscript{18} would underestimate the role of the state in controlling the reproduction processes of society, and lead to some variant of ‘the social-democratic gap’ experienced by radical social movements in West Germany before the advent of alternative and green electoral lists.\textsuperscript{19} In order to have their demands translated into institutionalized politics and implemented by legislation and government, they had to address them to more or less sympathetic social-democratic politicians who in fact acted as gatekeepers to the ‘real’ political process. There are good grounds, therefore, for ‘pressing towards power’. The question must be asked, however, if and how such a ‘party-like formation’ can escape the vicissitudes of the party form (which even in its revolutionary variants has been analyzed as an Ideological State Apparatus\textsuperscript{20}). And the experience of the West German Greens seems to indicate that the measures proposed by Kovel to cope with the potentially sinister dialectic of the party form are structurally insufficient, i.e. they are either realistically inapplicable or insufficient for reaching the goal of the required transformation of the party-form itself as a condition of the eco-socialist transformation of society.

The first principle of organization Kovel postulates\textsuperscript{21} is that the party be ‘grounded in communities of resistance’, with ‘delegation from such communities’ supplying ‘the cadre of party activists as such’. Such a principle had been accepted in the early formative phase of the West German Greens, too, but turned out to be impracticable from the moment the party organization was also ‘open to individuals’, as Kovel himself acknowledges. And, in fact, building a party on collective membership alone would create an innumerable series of problems of accountability and participation (in a real world structured by the individualistic ideology of law) and would specifically need
PARTY-BUILDING FOR ECO-SOCIALISTS

a guarantee of the internal democracy of each and every one of the participating units.\textsuperscript{22}

Kovel’s second principle of organization may seem self-evident to his American readers: ‘The party is to be internally funded through contributions by members, structured in such a way that no alienating force can take financial control’. In contrast to ‘sponsors’ buying politicians by their ‘voluntary contributions’ to electoral funds requiring many millions of US dollars this is, in fact, self-evident. But what about constitutional state funding of parties, which is a recent tradition in continental Europe, modelled on the state funding of churches? The state does not, in these frameworks, intervene as an ‘alienating force’, with funding based on general rules open to control by the judiciary. Neither extreme left nor extreme right wing parties, insofar they are legal, are excluded from state funding. In the German system of party funding, even the ‘establishment effect’ of these rules is rather mitigated: any party or electoral list getting more than 1.5 per cent of the votes cast is entitled to its share of state money. Refusing to take this money would be damaging in relation to competing political parties who all take it. Taking it would certainly tend to reinforce the electoralist tendencies within the party, by making its functionaries dependent on electoral success. If, however, electoral success is any yardstick at all for the success of a party, judged for example by the number of parliamentary seats won, this tendency towards electoralism would seem inherent in the party form as such, and not the effect of a system of state finance for parties.\textsuperscript{23}

Third, Kovel advocates a flexible variant of the ‘imperative mandate’.\textsuperscript{24} All ‘delegates and administrative bodies’ should be subject to a system of regular rotation and recall. This principle of grass-roots democracy\textsuperscript{25} has been re-elaborated and amply implemented in the early history of the West German Greens. Are there lessons to be learned from its embattled abandonment – stretching from the middle of the 1980s to the early 1990s? There are, basically, two such lessons. First, these rules should be clearly distinguished from the liberal principle of non-professionalism in politics,\textsuperscript{26} which in reality serves to make politics a reserved area for professionals, civil servants and teachers who possess or are granted enough disposable time to engage in politics. This implies that there should be a real possibility of ‘living from politics’, and not only ‘for politics’ (as Max Weber put it) during the considerable stretch of a life-time that is needed to build not only individual competence with regard to specific areas of politics, but also the kind of media presence and grass-roots trust needed to make one’s voice heard. This could be made possible by accepting rotation between different types of posts within one area of politics, including NGO or social movement organizations, or – in a
maybe more radical vein – by a system of funding political activism by concerned ‘communities of struggle’. Second, this principle should not be perverted by coercion, as in the case of ‘democratic centralism’, nor deflected to serve as a means of hindering party initiatives and actions by a mechanism of ‘checks and balances’, as in the liberal tradition. It should be flexibly followed with the aim of creating a higher kind of party unity in action, bringing different perspectives and sensibilities together within a common perspective of radical transformation.

Fourth, Kovel postulates the need for openness and transparency in all party deliberations ‘except [on] certain tactical questions (for example, the details of a direct action)’. This is unquestionable. And yet he seems totally unaware of the ‘other side’ this principle has in a modern mass party, which the experience of the German Greens has amply exemplified, and which brings us to the perhaps most important explanation of their failure, as mentioned at the end of the previous section of this essay. Openness and transparency in fact operate in two directions, with the media serving as a hugely important filter and agency – and are likely to result in published opinions controlled by media tycoons, overlaying and dominating the internal debates of the party. In the case of the German Greens this has probably been the single most important factor weighing in favour of the ‘Realo’ wing of the party, which was consistently supported by the entire spectrum of published opinion, and secured the defeat of the party’s left wing, which was far more deeply anchored among the first generation of party activists, but was framed by the media as being ‘fundamentalist’. This went so far as to even help change the very composition of party activists, giving the Realo wing, reinforced by those parts of the left which preferred to stay in government, a real majority at a party conference for the first time in 1998. Developing a strong alternative media culture within the party and in its supporting areas is certainly a must from this perspective, but also certainly not sufficient. The left needs to take up the battle for media reform as a high priority; in the meantime some degree of party control over general media access to internal party debates, and some disciplinary rules for party members in using their media access (e.g. excluding the use of certain tabloids and TV chains for interviews) will also be needed.

Even if Kovel’s principles had been fully applied, and handled with the real ‘artfulness and subtlety’ that he calls for, it is doubtful whether such a development as that of the German Greens (and more generally of the European continental Greens who have to some degree, although often less markedly, travelled the same path towards a renewed political establishment) could have been avoided, because these principles do not really address the
underlying paradox of the very form of the emancipatory political party, i.e. how to ‘press toward power’ with the aim of overcoming all structures of domination, and how to enter into the existing ideological system of electoral politics with the aim of achieving a liberating transformation of the society so as to abolish its structural relations of domination and dominance. A ‘prefigurative vision surpassing the given society’, as postulated by Kovel, would be very helpful indeed in handling this elementary paradox. But without clear ideas about the ‘contradictions’ and tendencies entailed in operating within existing society (all the more complex a question when we take the global situation into account), prefigurative visions may tend to sink into an increasingly infertile utopianism. There is an urgent need, therefore, to inform social movements by scientific inquiries into the nature of the societies they are rebelling against. Anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, anti-sexist, anti-racist theorizing are needed to supply social movements and any emancipatory party with sufficiently clear and sharp ideas of what needs to be transformed in their societies. Marxist, feminist, and cultural analyses will have to be re-read and synthesized with a view to providing the leading ideas for such a new kind of emancipatory party. This is urgently needed, though not because the movement activists were somehow structurally unable to address the underlying causes of their predicament – as Kautsky and Lenin led generations of Marxists to believe about the working class, supposed to be bound in its ‘spontaneous consciousness’ to reformist ‘trade unionism’. Rather, theoretical work is needed because the very articulation of the experiences underlying these social movements, which is required to be able to communicate them to other social movements with other experiences, or over time to ensuing generations – is simply impossible without adequate concepts. This can only be acquired by a critique of existing conceptualizations, which is the core work of critical theory.

While Joel Kovel has gone some way in pointing to more effective party-building by combining his four principles of organization with a call for an informed and emancipatory ‘anti-capitalism as a point of reference’²⁷ (which he sees as especially important for guarding against petty bourgeois parochialism and localism), he leaves us feeling we still are a considerable distance away from the ‘kind of self-generative and non-linear dialectic’ he anticipates, ‘that can rapidly accelerate the motion toward eco-socialism’.²⁸ And this raises the question of whether there are any lessons to be learnt from the experience of the German Greens on how to strive in an effective way to get from here to there. Some such lessons are indeed brought to mind on reading Stanley Aronowitz’s most recent arguments for a radical party, which raise the more
immediate questions of party building (although very specifically addressing the situation in the USA).  

Aronowitz’s starting point is the diagnosis of another kind of parochialism which certainly has also been present within the German Greens – the ‘parochialism of late Critical Theory’. There were many ways in which the late critical theory of the Frankfurt School helped to shape the fundamental political outlook of green party activists (who were even less intellectually coherent than Anglo-Saxon greens). The kind of parochialism Aronowitz describes does not need this kind of influence, as it may also be seen as being part of the ‘common sense’ of most people engaging in politics in Germany since the 1960s: ‘only Western Europe and North America were worthy of concern’ and ‘only white men were capable of entering history’. Therefore, Aronowitz argues cogently, they ‘could not see …the profound implications of the emerging global vision of the ecology, feminist and labor movements for the creation of a new opposition to transnational capitalism’. So far Aronowitz’s argument coincides with Kovel’s but then he takes a slightly different turn by specifying the present situation: ‘The Seattle demonstrations of December 1999, the subsequent mass demonstrations at Quebec, Genoa and Spain against the key institutions of global capital, and the development of the World Social Forum, whose location in Brazil’s Porto Alegre was symbolic of a global shift, as both an attempt to create a new civil society and as a post-9/11 continuation of the protests, present new possibilities’. This is relevant to one of the most salient lessons of the experience of the German Greens, which seems to be that the decisive element in the building and in the development of a party is never to be found within the party itself, but in the broader trends and tensions of the ‘conjunction’ within which it lives as a social, ideological and political entity – in the ‘occasions’ and in the ‘impossibilities’ which it has to confront in order to survive as a meaningful political project.

These ‘new possibilities’ are identified by Aronowitz as a historical occasion for building a ‘radical party’ as a new type of ‘third party’ in the USA. His ‘meditation on left political organization’ is not primarily referring to ‘American exceptionalism’. He expressly addresses the ‘rise of the New Left in all western nations’ after the bankruptcy of the ‘main political parties of the Left’ had become patent, with the end of the post-war period and the emergence of ‘a series of “new” social movements which consciously spurn the concept of “party” itself’. Aronowitz’s moderate ironizing of the ‘newness’ of these social movements seems linked to the short diagnosis he offers of the ‘exception, the global phenomenon of Green parties’, seeing them ‘in the framework of the revolt of the ecology movement against the so-
cial–democratic mainstream rather than as an attempt to form a new radical party’. Aronowitz is indubitably right in putting into question the amnesiac illusions of newness that were widespread in the emancipatory movements of the 1960s. However, he seems to underestimate the importance of the demand for ‘autonomy’ which was a defining element in a whole set of radicalizing ‘second generation’ movements – from the *autonomia operaria* in Italy, which had counterparts in most other leading capitalist countries, and the autonomous women’s liberation movement, which emerged trans-nationally from its very beginnings, to a new generation of anti-colonial, anti-racist, and ecological movements. It is also true, and in retrospect irrefutable, that all of these movements were historically marked very specifically by their opposition to the fordist constellation of capitalist domination, and vulnerable, therefore, to the lure of neo-liberal anti-fordism, seemingly promising to put an end to big capital as well as big unions and big government. This apparently leads Aronowitz into thinking that the ambition of green party building did not go beyond changing social democracy – which is in fact what has been mainly achieved by it, and what the Realo wing of the party has for some time claimed as a strategic objective (before aiming at displacing the Liberal party as the linchpin of the German party system, which they have failed to achieve).

But in actual fact, the building of a new party of systemic opposition, capable of bundling together all the radical opposition movements, from the new ecological movements, through the new women’s movement, to the new peace movement, has been the explicit aim of the leading exponents of the green left in Germany. Their failure cannot simply be explained by assuming that they did not try. Nor did the difference between the Realo wing and the green left in the 1990s simply relate to the question of parliamentary vs. extra-parliamentary perspectives, as Aronowitz suggests. It was about the strategy of parliamentary politics, the necessity of which itself had been accepted by all wings of the party: was it to prepare for participating in governments by operating as a ‘constructive’ opposition or partner in government, or was it to develop political contradictions to a point where deeper changes would become possible – accepting the necessity of longer phases of opposition, insofar as participation in government could not be had under a radical political programme? And with the rising wave of the neo-liberal counter-revolution sapping the continental welfare-states, the key question of strategy became more and more whether the greens should support neo-liberal ‘reforms’ destroying fordist power structures (as the centre and right wing of the party affirmed), or whether they should support the resistance against them, with a view to turning them away from fordist nostalgia to a
new kind of affirmation of democratic politics and a new kind of globalized anti-capitalism (as the green left in fact affirmed, but with far less media attention). The lesson to be learned here, with a view to realistically initiating the building of a radical party in any advanced country dominated by the capitalist mode of production, is rather how urgent and how difficult it is to disengage some key parts of today’s opposition movements, like the trade unions, the women involved in gender-mainstreaming initiatives, or the environmental movements, from their entanglement in the vestiges of fordism – be it in the form of resentment or of nostalgia.

In spite of these criticisms the general conclusion Aronowitz arrives at seems to be convincing: before seriously engaging in party building in the sense of creating an organized agency for radical, transformative, and system-transcending politics – which would effectively embody in a specific historical situation what Kovel postulates for his Eco-Socialist party – ‘one might propose to form an organization that would attempt to mediate between theory and practice, humans and history’. Here again, I am afraid, the West German experience of creating – as it were – a new left out of the burnt and forgotten remnants of the old, practically without left father figures to rebel against, or without elder brothers capable of lending a helping hand, may offer a warning lesson: a series of – mostly Maoist – competing party building organizations were created to bring about the conditions for the re-building of the German Communist Party, before such a task could be seriously addressed. If I am not mistaken, all of them, after some time of frustrating attempts to create these conditions, which they never even came close to, have now declared themselves to be the reconstructed CP of Germany (and later on dissolved themselves, admitting their utter failure, some of them moving directly to the Green Party).

The tasks Aronowitz assigns to this party-building organization do not exclude such a turn in its development: ‘bring[ing] together those who are already discontented with the current state of things’ (although this particular formulation would be unduly open to right-wing discontent which in part extends to right-wing ‘anti-capitalism’ and, more frequently even, to right wing ‘anti-globalism’, which an internationally active radical party must fight without any ambiguity) and ‘the development of a public presence’ is certainly as much a task of the emerging radical party as of the party-building organization preparing its emergence. ‘To initiate a broad discussion of the central problems of social and political theory, situated in the actuality of global as well as of national situations’, certainly is an important task in preparing the ground for the kind of radical party Aronowitz is advocating; but, once emerging or having formed, it will also certainly have to carry on
with this task, or gradually lose touch with contemporary reality. The same holds true, I think, for the task of ‘revisiting the history of the left’ and of ‘developing an adequate theory of our own situation’. It may be a better idea rather to think about the kind of party-building organization needed in terms of a broad alliance for education and self-education – like the People’s Global Alliance, initiated by the ‘Zapatistas’, or the international network of ATTAC initiatives, initiated by the French ATTAC! Organization. Or even better to embed its creation in the process of the World Social Forum, and its Continental, National or Local/Regional levels of self-organized arenas of debate.46

CONCLUSION

Donald Sassoon has summarized the development we have tried to analyze in this way: ‘The political challenge of the greens was never sufficiently strong to cause a real crisis in West European Socialism’.47 Stanley Aronowitz, in a rather opposed perspective, insists that the greens was limited to ‘the revolt of the ecology movement against the social-democratic mainstream’.48

The most important lesson that the failed project of the German Greens has to teach may be simply that this is not the right kind of question: from our perspective, the experience of the German greens is not interesting or important because it tried to dislodge the established left, communist, labour, or social–democratic. It rather is interesting and important because it has lessons, especially from its formative phases, for those who are trying to build forms of explicitly political struggles giving voice and power to an emancipatory anti-capitalism in a positive way, addressing the unsolved conundrums from the history of the established left. Even this will still need adaptation to concrete conjunctures and conditions; yet it will also not be had without more general radical social and political theory. But, above all, it requires paying the most careful attention to what type of party-building organization can make eco-socialist popular education – and self-education – really effective.

NOTES

1 This essay is an attempt at an analysis ‘from inside’; therefore, implicitly, at self-criticism. Since the end of the 1970s I have actively participated in small activist groups looking for a way out of the crisis of the left by making good use of the impulses of the new social movements, especially in the field of renewed electoral politics. In Germany, this has led me, from time of the Socialist Conferences (1980–81), to participate in and often to co-ordinate, as it were, three
generations of leading left-green circles. This also involved participating in the preparation of strategic documents like the founding platform of the Initiative für Sozialistische Politik, the founding of the left-green monthly ‘Moderne Zeiten’ in 1982, and the publication of Thomas Ebermann’s and Rainer Trampert’s pamphlet on the Future of the Greens (Die Zukunft der Grünen, Hamburg: Konkret, 1983). I then participated in the organization of the left within the emerging Greens right up until the strategic defeat of the Green Left in Germany, with its opposition to NATO’s war on Yugoslavia. Especially since the first tactical defeats of the Ebermann-Trampert line in the mid-80s, I have also put considerable emphasis on participating in strategic debates in Europe, using the possibilities of my international contacts from the 1970s (mainly with Althusserians, dissident Trotskyites, and various brands of communist renovators). This was subsequently reinforced by my position as a Green Member of the European Parliament, with an explicit responsibility for strategically liaising with the emerging green-alternative left in France (co-founding the ‘Rainbow Movement’), in Great Britain (actively participating in various red-green conferences), and on the Iberian peninsula. This led to my co-authorship of the eco-socialist manifesto initiated by Pierre Juquin (A.V., Europe’s Green Alternative, Montréal: Black Rose, 1992). Looking back on these two decades from 1979 to 1999, I must say I have always worked beyond my real capacities, unable to control the outcome – as is, it seems, always the case in serious political and philosophical practice. This essay, however, does not undertake a personal self-criticism. It attempts to lay bare some strategic shortcomings underlying the first successes and the ensuing series of defeats of the German green-alternative left – so that a new generation of radical political initiatives may have the possibility of learning from this historical experience, taking up the thread of reflection already underlying my ‘Warum fällt es uns in den Grünen so schwer, über unsere Perspektiven zu diskutieren?’, in Erwin Jurtschitsch, Alexander Rudnick and Frieder Otto Wolf, eds., Grüne Perspektiven (Grün-Alternatives Jahrbuch 1988), Köln: Kölner Volksblatt, 1988, pp. 88-117; and more recently, albeit much more briefly, in ‘What Happened to the West German Greens’, Red Pepper, 110(August), 2003, pp. 8-9.

2 The example of the FRG is telling here, because it made so explicit that this openness of the political sphere had its limits – by prohibiting an already marginalized CP in 1956. But these limits were also demonstrated, of course, by McCarthyism in the US, and even by the exclusion of the PCI from Italian government coalitions.

3 In Germany, there never was an exemplary police repression against the protest movement like that in France with the ‘battle of Malville’ in 1977, where non-violent protesters were relentlessly beaten and some killed by militarized police forces, breaking the neck, as it were, of the French protest movement. In Germany, by contrast, the ‘battle of Brokdorf’ in 1981, where 200,000 protesters participated in an ‘illegal’ demonstration against a planned nuclear site, could not be won by a huge police force going to the limits of legal police actions, against well-organized resistance. Cf. Simples Citoyens, Memento Malville. Une
I formulate it from memory – having practically lived through these developments since the end of the 1970s. There are a number of significant studies of the development of the Greens. To get a general background, I still recommend Werner Hülsberg’s *The German Greens. A Social and Political Profile*, translated by Gus Fagan, London: Verso, 1988. The most relevant study from the perspective of our discussion has been Jorge Riechmann’s very thorough and theoretically acute analysis of *Los Verdes Alemanes. Historia y análisis de un experimento ecopacifista a finales del siglo XX*, Granada: Comares, 1994. Of course, the great studies by Joachim Raschke, *Die Grünen: wie sie wurden, was sie sind*, Köln: Bund, 1993, and, *Die Zukunft der Grünen*, Frankfurt: Campus Sachbuch, 2001, are unbeatable in empirical detail and intelligent comment. But he tends to see things politically in a not very illuminating mainstream perspective, whereas Riechmann is defending a radical political perspective – without illusions, yet also without resignation.

The Anglo-Saxon literature on the German Greens, epitomized by the way the British ecologist Sara Parkin shudders at the leftism she found in most of the German Greens (see her *Green Parties: An International Guide*, London: Heretic, 1989), and the similar projections in Donald Sassoon’s ‘the New Left of the 1960s in green clothes’ (in his *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*, London: Fontana, 1996, p. 678) misses the whole point. This is exactly what the German Greens – on the ‘Fundi’ as well as on the ‘Realo’ side – were about: to translate the dreams and wishes of the 1960s into effective politics.

This had not been the case from the very beginning (as Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, p. 677 believes), but was the result of a strategic realignment initiated by Thomas Ebermann from the left seeking a strategic alliance with Rudolf Bahro and Jutta Ditfurth in the summer of 1983 – leaving the pragmatic municipal activists of the green left ‘out in the cold’.

The decisive role of local politics in the building and functioning of the German Greens has been analyzed by Bodo Zeuner and Jörg Wischermann, in their *Rot-Grün in den Kommunen*, Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1994.


To those who will say that from a truly revolutionary perspective this is true, I would simply reply that this would mean deferring revolutions, at least in the ‘imperialist metropolitan countries’, indefinitely, or at least for a very long time.

On the one hand, the interest of the functionaries of the traditional (communist or social-democratic) labour movement in combining revolutionary principles with an acceptance of their own day-to-day practice of trying to gain improve-
ments’ for the organized working class which could not even be conceived of as ‘reformist’ (in the strong sense of constituting steps on a path leading beyond capitalism); and, on the other hand, the interest of radicalized intellectuals who, given their difficulties in gaining access to the labour movement and having their ideas heard in it, tended to be receptive to an ideology that comforted them by explaining the utter impossibility of even trying. Paradoxically, both the Stalinist ideology of subservience to the party line (as beautifully ‘theorized’ e.g. by György Lukács in his Lenin: Studie über den Zusammenhang seiner Gedanken, Wien: Arbeiterbuch, 1924) and the ‘absurdist’ theory of the total impossibility of a praxis non-corrupted by the ‘false totality’ of the existing constellation of domination, as it has been popularly read into Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s later writings, are capable of satisfying this need – their relatively changing ‘evidence’ being mainly constituted by the relative fate of the political organizations of the labour movement outside of intellectual debates.

11 Classical examples of this are Eric Hobsbawm’s mistaking the historical construct of ‘the working class’ in Great Britain for the ‘working class’ in the sense of Marxist class analysis and considering everything else as ‘middle class’ (cf. e.g. his ‘Labour’s Lost Millions’, Marxism Today, October, 1983); and Donald Sassoon’s persistent talk (in One Hundred Years of Socialism, pp. 697, 699 and 712) about the ‘middle class’, when referring to new strata of wage earners. At the same time, there is another version of such class analyses that in trying to explain why petty bourgeois, peasant or feminist rebellions will never lead to a real process of societal emancipation, perversely end up sustaining the position that, at the end of the day, such an emancipation will simply never take place. Since according to this argument the proletarian movements expected to bring it about will only materialize where and when all scope for non-proletarian politics has been thoroughly exhausted, this is tantamount to deferring emancipation to a never–never day, when all potential allies of proletarian anti-capitalism will have exhausted their own political resources – and when, therefore, the chances that the proletariat itself will challenge capitalist domination through its own class struggle will be very dim indeed.

12 To think otherwise has been the fatal error of Rudolf Bahro and his followers in the later 1980s (cf. the retrospective collection of Rudolf Bahro’s essays in his Apokalypse oder Geist einer neuen Zeit, Berlin: Edition Ost, 1995) who paid for it by losing any measurable influence on the further development of the greens as a real social and political movement.

13 Rudolf Bahro, Die Alternative: Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus, Köln: EVA, 1977. What was surprising about it was the fact of being written by an author from the GDR, and that this author maintained a specific kind of ‘communist’ perspective.

14 Talking about ‘re-unification’ is somewhat misleading: the territories effectively unified had never formed a German nation state, and considerable parts of the territories staying outside had been part of a German empire, which had colonized other nations, especially Poles – not to mention the Austrian traditions of empire, which had always been part and parcel of the German political
tradition, until the turn towards a ‘smaller Germany’ initiated by Bismarck in
the 1860s.


16 Ibid., 233.

17 Ibid.


19 Donald Sassoon has touched upon this problem as a ‘fraught division of labour
between new social movements and parties of the Left’ (*One Hundred Years of
Socialism*, p. 673). He does not, however, understand that Green party building
in Germany has been an attempt to do something about this kind of problem,
by creating a ‘parliamentary arm’ for the social movements (cf. p. 674).

20 Althusser’s well-known general thesis was later concretized by him in a vivid
plea for ‘the liberty of a communist’, as well as in a specific description of ‘what
cannot go on like this in the French Communist Party’ (cf. his *Ce qui ne peut

21 The following quotes are all from Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, p. 233.

22 At this point, further reflection could take Althusser’s radicalization and subver-
sion of the concept of the communist ‘party cell’ as a starting point.

23 From this perspective, it is significant that since the late 1990s German Greens
have started trying to add sponsor money to the party funds.

24 For a more detailed discussion of this instrument of democratic control in the
left tradition cf. my contribution ‘imperatives Mandat’, in W.F. Haug, ed., *His-
torisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Bd. 6.1, Hamburg: Argument, 2004,
pp. 837-47.

25 This translation of ‘Basisdemokratie’ is very approximate. It specially does not
give an adequate sense of the ambivalent ‘metaphysics’ linked to a ‘base’ which
was at the same time the object of a passively plebiscitarian mobilization by
informal leaders, like Joschka Fischer or Jutta Ditfurth, against the institutions
of democratic procedure within the party – reminiscent of Robert Michels’ or
Alfredo Pareto’s ‘law’ of ‘oligarchical rule’. Cf. the very thorough and critical
retrospective treatment of the real functioning of green ‘grass roots democ-

cracy’ by Paul Tiefenbach: ‘Wie hat die Grüne Basisdemokratie funktioniert?’ in

26 Failing to make this distinction is the main flaw of Tiefenbach’s treatment.

27 Tiefenbach, ‘Wie hat die Grüne Basisdemokratie funktioniert?’, p. 234. Especially
in Germany, it is impossible to forget about the existence of right-wing anti-
capitalism, which is anti-semitic in its very essence. Kovel is more concerned
with how such an anti-capitalism can overcome the ‘petty bourgeois’ side of
green politics. This has, however, taken the form of the ‘social advancement’
syndrome in the case of the West German Greens, not so much as a reflection
of localism and parochialism, as Kovel seems to think, as of making the political
representation of migrants who ‘made good’ one of the strong points of green
politics in Germany up to the present.

28 Ibid., p. 236.


And it certainly has been no accident that the Realo-Fundi opposition – overlaying so much of the internal struggles of the German Greens – has originated in the Frankfurt of the ‘Frankfurt School’.


Ibid., pp. 42ff.


Ibid., pp. 124ff.

Ibid., p. 140.

Ibid.

The argument of the intelligent fundamentalists had been, from the very beginning, that the party would get a better deal from occasional agreements in critical situations – within parliament – than in coalition agreements stretching over an entire legislature (or even more).

It should be noted here that the current attempt to create a common parliamentary party out of the PDS (combining already, unequally, the remaining organizational heritage of the East German ‘socialist unity party’ and the remnants of the West German alternative left (after leaving the Greens again, or staying outside of them) and the WASG (combining trade union activists with some SPD dissidents and a considerable number of new radical activists, some of them of Trotskyite orientation) may, in so far it succeeds, constitute an important step in changing the parliamentary balance inside Germany, but certainly is not yet a process of ‘party formation’ in Aronowitz’s sense (‘Is It Time’, p. 156). The new party still lacks a sizeable mass basis – although it has a real presence among trade-union rank and file – and is vulnerable to facile but sectarian ‘solutions’ to the unresolved strategic problems of the radical left which have also beset the German green left in earlier decades; it also still has to rely heavily on the organizational and ideological heritage of the PDS, which is far from having completed the self-critical process of overcoming the traditions of theoretical and practical Stalinism.


All the following quotations are from ibid., pp. 156–7.

On the other hand, given the complexity and foreseeable long-windedness of at least some of the necessary debates, the whole thing will not effectively be able to function without maintaining or even gaining some strongholds within the institutionalized social sciences, i.e. without a continued presence within academia.

Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, p. 679.