

Pierre Charbonnier

# For an Ecological Realpolitik

01/06

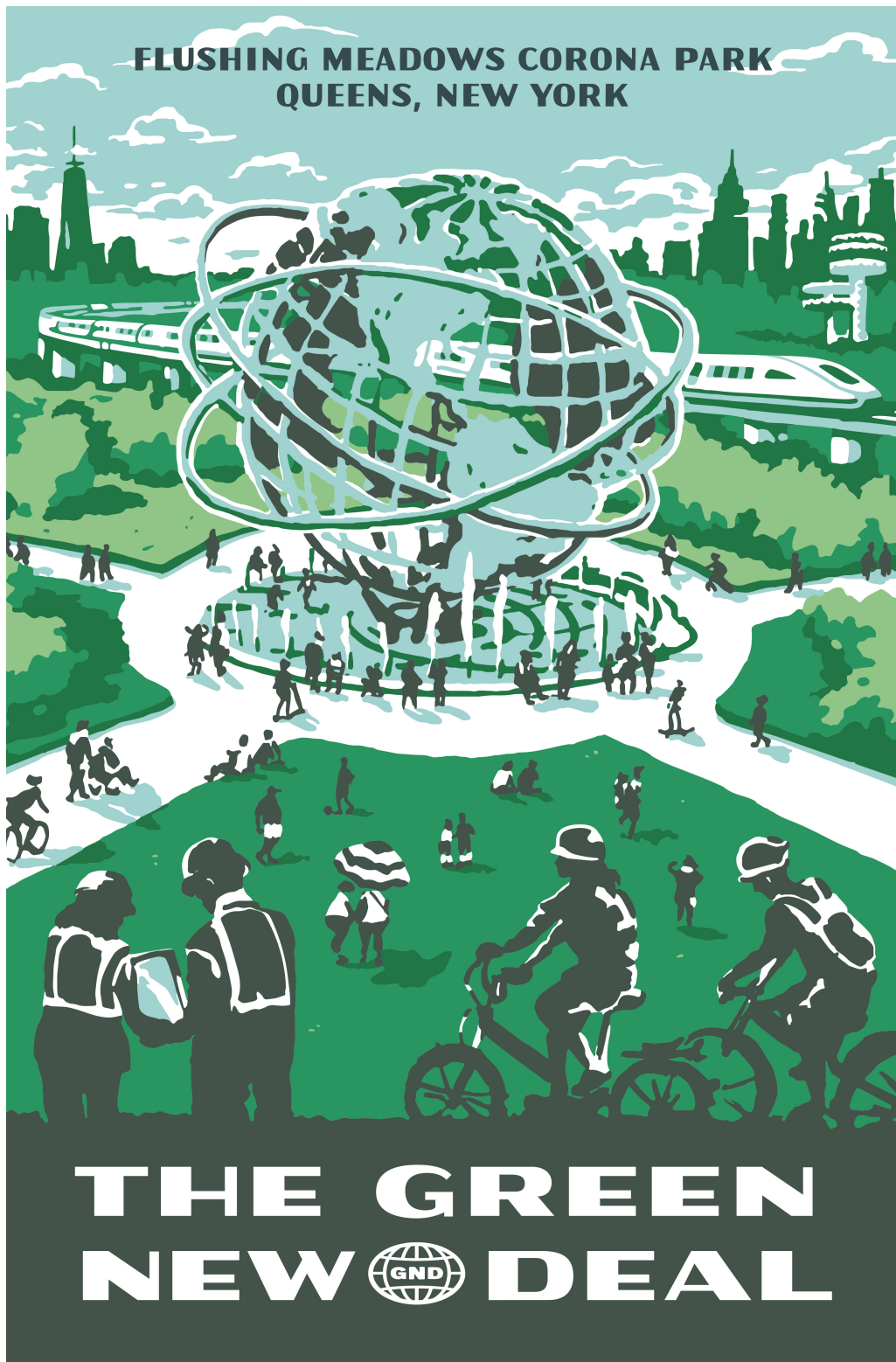
On September 22, 2020, Xi Jinping, the chairman of the People's Republic of China, announced a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions with the aim of achieving carbon neutrality before 2060. Here, then, is China, the world's largest CO2 producer and leading industrial power, sometimes dubbed the "chimney of the world," seemingly embarking on an unprecedented path of development.

Since at least the 1990s, Western environmentalism has been the subject of scathing criticism, notably from India. Ramachandra Guha, for instance, exposed the colonial and racist imaginary of the "wilderness" that enabled Americans to cleanse their urban and industrial guilty conscience by way of natural parks, which were established by evicting indigenous populations. This colonial disorder, which accompanies the environmental policies of the wealthy, continues to a certain extent with the paradox of the Green New Deal. There has long been a gap between ecology's universalist, moral discourse, including when it is linked to social issues, and the darker reality of the structural, material inequities that it struggles to offset. We know therefore that ecology's moral superiority does not amount to much, that it is something to be forged rather than posited. Peaceful ideas are often intimately bound up with a violent world.

And in this respect, too, the Chinese decision has upended the game. Indeed, the plan Xi announced to phase out fossil fuel dependence is based neither on a moral argument with regard to the environmental ravages caused by extractive industrialism, nor on the desire to curb or abolish the system of capitalist exploitation. It simply seeks to modify its material foundation, in what could be called an eco-modernist perspective, which is not incompatible with power ambitions. It so happens that, because of the Chinese economy's weight on a global scale, this plan – decided in a vertical, top-down fashion – is likely to have beneficial consequences for the global climate, and hence for all of humanity (which is what distinguishes it from a similar plan adopted in France, for example). At the same time, the plan is but a lateral consequence of global power-game decisions made in Beijing – a game the chairman of China knows how to play well.

We Europeans tend to think (and I am no exception) that the ecological question has taken over from a liberating movement that has run out of steam. We think, in other words, that environmentalism enshrines the social demands of equality and freedom in a new regime of production and consumption that could loosen

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Green New Deal poster developed for Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's campaign, 2020. Artist: Gavin Snider; Creative Director: Scott Starrett; Detailer Dayi Tofu, Maria Arenas; Type: Jamie Wilson. Copyright: Tandem, NYC

the hold of economic exploitation and individualist anomie. In short, the point is to promote the emergence of a new social type, breaking with the one that accompanied the period of rapid growth, and rely on this to reactivate the process of democratization and social inclusion that has come to a standstill. This project can be used to disqualify the Chinese announcement, to assert that it does not rise to the challenge or that it resolves the problem through authoritarian means. That may well be. But by adopting this strategy (and I believe that this is the prevailing attitude in these spheres), we run the risk of not fully grasping the geopolitical and ideological waters in which we are navigating willy-nilly, and hence of not grasping the historical sense of our own project.

Indeed, it is simplistic to imagine that the conflict in which we are caught pits exploiting, alienating, and extractive capitalism against a political ecology of reconciliation between human beings, and between humans and nonhumans. This would be the consequence of conflating the countercultural lexicon of environmentalism with the lexicon of social critique in the red-green universe: ecology or barbarism. But now we find ourselves in a situation where aging fossil capitalism, mired in its material and social contradictions, coexists with a state capitalism engaged in accelerated decarbonization, and with the more demanding and radical path of reinventing the meaning of progress and the social value of production. If we accept this description of the situation, as clearly rudimentary as it is, Europe's red-green left takes on a different significance. It is then no longer locked in a binary confrontation with capitalism (reputed to be unfailingly fossil) in which it embodies the frontline of progress, invested as it is with a universal mission. The Chinese model that is being developed provides a third term, a third model of development, which is both compatible with the global climate aims defined in the 2016 Paris Agreement and possibly in tension with the green ideal of democracy that the social-ecological movement advocates.

Otherwise put, political ecology loses its status as the unique countermodel; it loses its ability to impose itself in debates as an anti-hegemonic political form. Two questions follow from this. First, what kind of alliance will it establish with the Chinese model to safeguard at least what is essential on a strictly climatic level, at the risk of no longer having "clean hands"? And, symmetrically, how will it make its specificity heard with regard to this new paradigm?

The European social-ecological left must figure out whether the Chinese announcement has "stolen the spotlight," so to speak, by embodying the central path towards breaking the climate impasse, or whether, by a more complex game of three players, which also involves relations with the United States, it opens a breach that must be entered without delay. This breach is quite simply the definitive weakening of fossil capitalism, that is, of the American way of life (indeed, the US appears to be the weakest player on the global political and economic scene right now), consequently opening the possibility of a more direct debate between China and Europe. To put the question even more simply: What political forms should undergird the ecological turn? European ecology must take a turn towards realism. This does not mean it has to embark on an aggressive, pugnacious debate with other geopolitical players, but it must abandon its harmful habit of expressing itself in consensual, pacifying, and even moralizing terms, and agree to play on a complex political terrain.

After all, this dimension has always been present in the history of social welfare, even though we don't always like to be reminded of these things. The development of systems of protection began in Prussia; and, in a way, Xi Jinping is a little like the Bismarck of ecology: he does not so much listen to the demands of environmental justice as he anticipates them in order to silence them. The postwar advances in social rights in Europe are incomprehensible outside the geopolitical game that combines the specter of fascism, the war to be stamped out, the Bolshevik possibility, and American influence. As a British political representative put it, "The National Health Service is a by-product of the blitz."<sup>2</sup> The fact is that emancipation is not always, and not even primarily, won through expressions of moral generosity; it is also a matter of power. The figure of Lenin seems to be making a return to favor in critical thought, perhaps precisely because ecology has not yet found its Lenin.

The ecology movement should therefore agree to talk about strategy, conflict, and security; it should present itself as a dynamics of building a political form that assumes the idea of power without scaling back on social and democratic demands. In fact, these demands can only be achieved if they are invested into specifically political reflections and practices. But for this to be possible, we have to leave behind our tendency toward moral depoliticization, because we no longer have a monopoly on the critique of the fossil development paradigm. A new arena is emerging, and we have no choice but to launch ourselves into it.



PAID FOR BY ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ FOR CONGRESS

PRINTED IN 2020

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*Translated from the French by Gila Walker.*

*This essay originally appeared as “Le tournant réaliste de l’écologie politique,” Le Grand Continent, September 30, 2020: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/09/30/le-tournant-realiste-de-lecologie-politique/>*

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1

Adam Tooze, "Did Xi Just Save the World?" *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2020  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/25/xi-china-climate-change-saved-the-world%E2%80%A8/>.

2

Quoted in Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Yale University Press, 2013), 131.

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