

**Environmentalism: A transatlantic perspective**  
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**Introduction**

There were high hopes for a greener America and a cleaner atmosphere when Obama conquered Washington two years ago. Little has been realized so far, and even less can be expected for the remainder of Obama's first, and if you may believe opinion polls also last, term in office. I do not want to dwell too long on facts and figures – first of all because I'm a philosopher and very bad at empirical stuff, secondly because as a philosopher I tend to be more interested in what the so-called facts really *mean*, or in how they can be *interpreted*, than in what the facts would actually be.

What I want to offer you today – in the roughly 25 minutes I've been given – is a series of thoughts on what separates the USA and Europe, other than a lot of water of course, in terms of perceptions of and ambitions for the environment. I'll make sweeping generalizations about Americans (i.e., US citizens) that will make De Tocqueville's *De la Démocratie en Amérique* read like a work of Byzantine subtlety. I'll use US climate and emissions policies as illustrations – philosophy has little use if it doesn't occasionally refer to some kind of reality – but it would be good to keep in mind that “the environment” includes a lot more than just global warming and greenhouse gases. However, I don't think illustrations relating to other faces of the environmental crisis would make much of a difference. Biodiversity and species protection, genetic engineering and frankenfood, acidification and eutropification, trans-ecology migration of species and plagues, desertification, and so on and so forth – the problems are basically the same on both sides of the Atlantic, it is the perception that differs.

What I want to suggest today is that there is an unbridgeable gap between (broadly speaking and over-generalizing) the European and the American perception of environmental problems not merely due to a different perception of the *environment* but also due to a different perception of the *problem*. It is this gap that helps to explain why the USA continues and must continue to disappoint European environmentalists – there's no claim here that anything I say *fully* explains (say) Copenhagen, or even *half* of what happened there, but I do believe it helps. Maiming someone else's immortal words: it's the culture, stupid!

**Ecologism**

All people green are, like Gaul, divided into three parties: the ecologists, the environmentalists, and the majority of those who have no idea what they are doing, really

– people who think recycling is good for nature, for instance. The latter may be the majority, but they're also philosophically the least interesting, so I'll leave them in their limbo.

Ecologists take the *ecology* as their object of concern – ecologism is a [w]holistic philosophy. It understands the whole of nature including you and me as an interconnected web of mutually dependent entities and phenomena. For ecologists, the ecology is valuable above all else – just like for nationalists the nation is worth a corpse or two. They value nature not for what it means to you, me or on any shortsighted anthropocentric perspective – nor does ecologism put disvalue on nature where it disadvantages, harms or threatens you or me. Ecologists are extremely wary of such potentially self-interested, exploitative, consumerist attitudes. Instead, ecologists value nature for its own sake – an idea often referred to as the intrinsic value of nature, although green political theorists like myself have shown that that precise concept is misplaced and cannot in reason be applied to nature (cf. Wissenburg 1998). More often than not, finally, ecologists think of nature as a process, a continually changing and developing web that paradoxically also constantly aims for harmony or equilibrium (cf. Dryzek & Schlosberg 2005, Dobson 2007, Wissenburg 2008).

The Atlantic divides ecologists (and as we shall see in a moment, not only them). Those in the East, the Europeans, are or at least were once inspired by collectivist social and political theories like Marxism and anarchism; they have only recently and only partially embraced bioregionalism as the cornerstone of their political dreams. Those in the West are inspired individualists, with Aldo Leopold's *Sand Country Almanac* (1949) on their bed stands – a book only recently discovered in the East (say, in the last two decades) and still not sufficiently appreciated. American ecologism is far less political – it's far more often expressed through contributions to environmental ethics, through civil society initiatives, and in the idea of bioregionalism, where the borders of social and political organizations would be defined by natural borders between ecological subsystems.

I mention ecologists only in passing, to contrast them to environmentalists. It is not that ecologists are not intrinsically interesting (because they are in the end the only *real* friends of the earth), nor that they are so demanding that they might as well live somewhere between Weirdville and Wacky Waters (which they do). I ignore them from here on, simply because they're not affected, not *touched*, by Obama. Quite to the contrary; they often seem more offended by *him* than they were by GW Bush. Obama makes environmentalism look good.

## **Environmentalism**

From the point of view of ecologists, environmentalism represents the Dark Side. Environmentalism looks at nature and sees – as the word environment already indicates – that which *surrounds* us humans, that, relative to which we stand in the centre; a mere object as opposed to us genuine subjects. Environmentalism understands nature as resources – ore and timber, food and shelter, but also rest and relaxation, inspiration and

freedom. The important thing is: it sees nature not as a whole including us but as distinct from us; it sees not cooperation and mutual advantage but exploitation and user value.

Environmentalists care about nature for a very long and impressive list of humanitarian reasons: they care because of the health, prosperity and happiness of us all, because of the environment's importance on so many levels and in so many respects for a life worth living and for the good of all humanity including future generations, sometimes even the cuddly animals we love, and let's not forget all them poor people down South. Environmentalists *care* – but they don't care about *nature*, they care about *humans* and their resources.

John Locke said that in the beginning, all the world was America – an inexhaustible garden of Eden. Environmentalism reflects the new and shocking discovery that America no longer exists – at least not Locke's America. Environmentalism reminds us of the finite nature of our planet and the genuine, physical scarcity of our resources – and it calls for some form of restraint, for sensible resource management. Environmentalism is, in brief, an extension of the appolonian, puritan ethics of economy and modesty from the world of artifice to that of nature.

To once more make a long story short: while in both East and West, environmentalism has spiced up, and to varying degrees even been integrated in, mainstream political ideologies, there are striking differences in the way the environmentalist message has been received on either side of the ocean.

First, there's the realm of facts. Skepticism about climate change and global warming, not to mention almost any depressing claim ever made by any environmentalist, is deeper and more frequent on the West side of our planet. Although facts, especially those of an environmental nature, are often soft and debatable, one does not start to question them unless one *wants* to. The different reception of IPCC reports, again merely as a token representative of all environmentalist claims, has less to do with the quality of empirical data – which is, after all, the same all over the planet – but rather with what the Wise Men of the East would call wishful thinking: different underlying values, dreams and desires.

We see this difference in world view or Weltanschauung also in the way East and West choose to interpret the Bible – embarrassing as Enlightened people like you and me may find this, Christian thought still has a firm grip on the minds of many, especially in the USA, and its doctrines must be taken into account if we want to understand the (non-)appeal of environmentalism.

Americans have remained faithful to the letter of the Bible: “and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). In the tradition of Locke, God has given us the Earth to exploit to the best of our God-given abilities. Many prominent European theologians, on the other hand, have chosen a different interpretation of the book. They reject dominion and

embrace the concept of *stewardship* – we are not to exploit and destroy, we are to manage and maintain all the beauty of creation, to “serve the garden in which we have been placed” (Genesis 2:15). This is not Locke, this is instead the tradition of my countryman, my great-uncle even, Hugo Grotius, according to whom there can be no scarcity because God’s creation is perfect; what seems to be scarcity is really only human vanity, a result of our fall from grace.

This difference in world views itself has three dimensions: those of policy, politics and anthropology – and each has its effect on both the shape of environmentalism in the West, and on its reception among non-environmentalists.

In terms of policy, or the choice of means, the East prefers distribution, control and regulation where the West prefers free enterprise, the market and private initiative. A beautiful illustration, perhaps, is the famous attempt to cross-breed the two traditions: first, authority creates and grants privileges called “emission rights”, and then a heavily regulated “free” market secures their allocation to the appropriate client.

The policy dimension reflects, at a deeper level, a difference in political ideals. The East seeks to realize or protect natural resources as a common asset of humanity or, if the wind blows the other way, as a national asset. For the West, nature is a libertarian entertainment park: the goodies are free for all, so long as enough and as good is left for others. Nature belongs to the guy or girl who actually *works* for his resources, who actually earns it. In Eastern politics, the state is the savior and protector of all; in the West – well, there’s Ronald Reagan joking that the nine words most feared by any American are “I’m from the government, I’m here to help you”. In other words, any environmental problem that can be understood as a collective action dilemma requiring authoritative interference is a lot easier to sell in the East than in the West.

And that brings me to the third and final dimension on which Eastern and Western world views differ: anthropology. Again, given the time I have, I am forced to over-generalize and be very crude – for which I apologize.

Perhaps the difference in anthropology can be illustrated by a thought experiment. Imagine that we enter a book shop and see, for the first time in our lives, the title of what is today a very famous book: Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society*, published in 1986 (the English translation is from 1992). While such a title sends shivers down the backbone of every thinking and breathing European, waking images of catastrophe and disaster, an American would be much more likely to interpret the title as *Opportunity Knocks*. The USA truly is the land of the Free and the home of those Brave enough to go it alone.

Ultimately, Europeans are collectivists or communitarians, while Americans are true individualists (cf. e.g. Orr 2004); the latter believe in man, the former in humanity.

In sum then, environmentalists East and West have to operate in a socially, politically and culturally different environment, where their ideas on policy goals and policy means are either received quite differently, or where those ideas have to be adapted to local tastes.

## What's Obama doing?

So let's look at Obama and his administration as if they were environmentalists. As said before, environmentalism is more than just CO<sub>2</sub> and climate change – climate policy merely serves as an illustration.

On the one hand, Obama has filled his administration with green guys – climate scientists and other connected to IPCC, and the Obama administration is quite busy developing legislation on e.g. emission standards for products and production. But the midterm elections are just days away: what Obama hasn't pushed through Congress now will probably not stand a chance for quite some time. Note, by the way, that like Europe, the USA is not too busy developing climate policies aimed at adaptation, only on mitigation. Finally, Obama and his jolly band entered the spiel of Climate Conferences, i.e., Copenhagen, as knights in shining armor.

But Copenhagen was a failure, if we must be honest. I'll give a brief summary – brief, therefore a bit too one-sided and unfair; for a slightly more balanced but equally pessimistic view see Peter Christoff's (2010) assessment in the journal *Environmental Politics*. Copenhagen resulted in a non-binding political agreement, not in real commitments. The aims formulated there are incredibly modest: while for developed countries the *initial* goal was set at a reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases by 2020 of between -25 and -40% below 1990 levels, the *end result* is a reduction of 12-19% below 1990 levels. Note that most climate experts see 40% as a *minimum* required to limit temperature rise to 2 degrees, and that even fairly optimistic experts believe 20% is the minimum. It's all the more disconcerting if you take into account, as experts in the history of climate suggest, that there may be a tipping point somewhere – a whiff too much of a greenhouse gas, and global temperatures go up not just by a homoeopathic amount, but drastically and virtually irreversibly.

It is for this reason, by the way, that USA involvement in climate change treaties and policies is broadly considered necessary. Its participation is not really needed *politically*; contrary to the expectations of many an IR scholar, the famous Kyoto Treaty was concluded and more or less successfully put into effect without US cooperation. Yet USA leadership is still required from an environmental perspective, that is, for a truly *effective* global policy (cf. Light et al. 2009, 2010).

All in all then, Copenhagen was a failure, perhaps more so than we yet realize. And this happened despite the active participation of the USA – or perhaps even because of that. Future research will have to determine whether the USA's role was that of a party trying to save as much of an agreement as possible when the whole thing threatened to fail perceptibly (that is, non-spinnably), or whether the USA cunningly used an opportunity to kill three birds with one stone: to protect its freedom of movement as much as possible; at the same time constrain the rest of the world as much as possible; and appear to be positively committed to the green cause in the eyes of the world. My money's on Obama the Machiavellian Meister.

Why did Copenhagen fail? Peter Christoff discusses several factors, all fairly crucial. There's the unpredictable behavior of the EU and EU member states, there's the general fear of the consequences of the global economic crisis, there's the politically excellent coordination within the so-called Group of 77, together with China masterfully blocking principle after principle and agreement after agreement, there's China itself, of course, with its insistence on its sovereignty and its fierce desire (and if I may say so, given the incredible misery in which so many Chinese still live today, the absolute moral duty) to protect its economic growth at any cost. And then there is of course the role of the USA – ultimately, Christoff argues, a hostage to its democratic institutions. Any result reached in Copenhagen would have to be defended at home and in Congress against the perception of climate change regulation as a threat to competitiveness and to American jobs, as requiring, along with 'emission reduction targets', regulations and thereby government interference in the market, and as being less important, less urgent and less close to home than the everyday domestic political agenda with issues like terror, drugs, health care, mortgages and banks and so on.

What else has Obama done in his first (not yet) two years? Clean energy regulation is slipping from his hands the longer Congress takes to revise it, amend it, send it back and forth, generally maiming and mutilating it. There are one or two successes so far – I'll discuss these in a moment – but all in all, the picture's quite discouraging.

Part of the reason is that no single administration can change a culture overnight – so it is not too surprising that Obama has not made much of an impression on climate skeptics or on religious leaders, or that Americans are still individualists. Another part of the explanation is that the Obama Administration seems to be guided by the well-known liberalism of the left-wing of the democratic party, preferring government interference, or a government 'taking its responsibility', and believing that civil society, in particular private initiative, has failed. The choice of policy instruments is telling as well. From a European perspective, the chosen path of general legislation aimed at production standards is probably perceived as irresponsible or insufficient, as it has no impact on individual citizens' preferences, on the level of consumption or on the distribution of environmental burdens. Yet in an American context, even this kind of legislation is divisive as it infringes on the liberties of all states, companies and citizens.

### **The Governorator**

It is at this point worthwhile to consider, for a moment, the environmental record of another remarkable American hero - in fact the American hero per se: the Governorator, Arnold Schwarzenegger, leader of the world's 9<sup>th</sup> largest economy, bankrupt as it may be.

Other things being equal, Schwarzenegger has made quite an impression on Europeans not only because of his vocal opposition to fellow Republicans in DC, most loudly on environmental topics – you may remember he almost gave California its own foreign policy with international environmental treaties – but also because of his green policies.

More than Obama, he has made an impression by leading where America failed. He put in place an extensive system of laws and regulations aimed at the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 and below that in later years, central to which is the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32). He introduced Automobile Emission Standards – which after obstruction by the Bush Administration, are now even adopted by Obama. Then there’s the recent law that “prohibits large utilities and corporations in California from making long-term contracts with suppliers who do not meet the state’s greenhouse gas emission standards” (Office of the Governor of California, 2010), and the requirement that energy suppliers should get their energy for at least 33% from renewable resources. The 2006 carbon credit system (which became effective in 2009) has quickly become a source of inspiration for environmental regulation worldwide. And there’s California’s record of promoting R&D on green technology, subsidies for families installing solar panels, tax relief for sale of green technology, and so on and so forth.

What does the case of the Governor show? For one, that you don’t have to be effective to be impressive – reduction of greenhouse gasses to 1990 levels is a far cry from the Copenhagen aims of a reduction of 12-19% below 1990, let alone the 20-40% really needed.

Secondly and less cynically, the Governor has shown that the un-Republican broad range of government instruments brought in on behalf of the environment *can* work, and that they *can* be accepted and embraced by Americans left and right, republican and democrat – and even by Europeans.

What I would like to suggest is that the success of the Governor may well be due to his creative use of John Stuart Mill’s famous Harm Principle, a principle that demands that an individual should be free to do whatever he or she likes, provided no one else is harmed. And I would also like to suggest that Obama’s administration might be more successful if it took the hint.

The Harm Principle is unique in that it can convince individualists who love freedom above all to limit freedom – for the sake of freedom. It is this principle that has been invoked to justify and very successfully raise support for anti-smoking policies: they may limit the smoker’s freedom, but that interest is overruled by the harm done to others’ liberty by involuntary secondary smoking. It’s the same Harm Principle that was also invoked in support of Abolition, by the way: it wasn’t just that booze was bad for the drinker, what mattered most was the harm it caused to children, families and other citizens.

Both of the environmental victories of the Obama administration are instances of an applied Harm Principle. One we’ve already briefly discussed: the adoption of the Californian Automobile Emission Standards. The other is an independent development. A couple of years ago, the Supreme Court, in *Massachusetts vs. EPA*, ruled that the Clean Air Act gives the Environmental Protection Agency the authority to require greenhouse gas reductions from power plants and other sources, provided the EPA first proved in a so-called “endangerment finding” that global warming poses a threat to the health and

safety of US citizens. After obstruction under the previous administration, the EPA finally managed to formulate this endangerment finding last December. While Obama's administration is apparently not too keen on this strategy – according to Andrew Light (2010), his administration prefers universal regulation of emission standards – the Clean Air strategy may still be the way to go: it offers a policy instrument that can be effectively applied almost anywhere, and that for once makes government interference perceived as legitimate and helpful rather than threatening and oppressive.

## Conclusion

Of course, invoking the Clean Air Act to limit greenhouse gas emissions also has its disadvantages. Most notably, since it can't be combined with *general* emission standards, it does not help the US government should it want to bind itself to international standards, and worse, open-ended policies like these will not inspire trust among those foreign nations – European but also Asian – that themselves rely on strong, bureaucratically ruled government, and that often cannot think of government in other terms.

Here's the dilemma then: what it takes to succeed at home is what guarantees failure in the international arena, and what it takes to succeed internationally is what implies political suicide at home. To act effectively as a broker in international climate policy, the USA must itself be a reliable partner; its government and diplomats must be able to make definite promises and to guarantee that those promises *can* be kept (to demand that they *will* be kept is a step too far in any possible universe). Yet to act effectively as a protector of the citizens of the USA, that same government has to implement policies that do *not* impose such definite goals, policies that do *not* use citizens as instruments to reach those goals, policies that instead *do* aim at citizens as goals in themselves, that aim at protecting individual citizens against individual instances of injustice.

The USA, Obama and his administration are not so much victims of their own democratic institutions (*pace* Christoff) as they are, ultimately, the “victim” of America's culture and philosophy – its love of risk and free enterprise, of individual responsibility and, in the end, individual freedom. Since is unlikely that this culture will change in the immediate future, the only way forward for Obama and his successors lies in showing – i.e., *proving* – to Asia and Europe that there are more ways than one that lead to the green hills of Rome.

It is perhaps ironic, by the way, that by turning to the Harm Principle (in the form of the Clean Air Act), environmental policy will be justified not by appeals to abstract worries like future generations and individual enlightenment, nor by vague and dubious aims like global justice and biodiversity, but by an appeal to health. This is ironic because health was the original argument of the first environmentalists, 50 years ago (think of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*), an argument long abandoned since in favor of “higher” values. It *is* that sincere for environmentalists to focus on health again – environmentalism shouldn't hide that it is “merely” enlightened self-interest or, as ecologists would call it, anthropocentric egoism; it should come out of the closet and embrace its identity. That



too may be a way of bridging the gap between European and American environmentalists.

Thank you.

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