

Global Warming: the Death of Environmentalism?

Stefano Nespor

I. The environmentalism debate in the US

In October 2004, two eminent American environmentalists, Michael Shellenberg and Ted Nordhaus, published an article with the provocative title “The death of environmentalism”). Their claim was that modern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world’s most serious ecological crisis, global warming above all. They reached this conclusion observing that in the last 15 years environmental organisations have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to combat global warming with strikingly little to show. From the battles over higher fuel efficiency for cars and trucks to the attempts to reduce carbon emissions, environmental groups repeatedly have tried and failed to win national legislation that would reduce the threat of global warming.

As a result, Shellenberg and Nordhaus observe that people in the environmental movement are today much less powerful than they were one and a half decades ago; then environmental organisations and, in general, the concerned public could claim credit for significant advances in a relatively short period of time in protecting the environment and in creating a huge system of environmental law.

The authors’ drastic conclusion is that environmentalism must be reframed: The important question for contemporary environmentalists is how to alter underlying popular perceptions of **environmental issues** in order to start a new environmentalism and a new approach to environmental law. In this new understanding environment is not a special interest competing with other legitimate public interests, but a comprehensive issue underlying a vast range of problems: surely global warming, but also, for instance, poverty, war, competitiveness and social health.

Shellenberg and Nordhaus have provoked a passionate and prolonged **debate in the U.S.** Among the supporters of the authors’ thesis is Adam Werbach, president of the Sierra Club and often described as “one of the best-known conservationists of his generation”.

Critics however seem to be more numerous than supporters. Particularly sharp has been the reply of Carl Pope, director of the Sierra Club, who declared “Their case... not only flimsy, it is internally contradictory and misleading”². Phil Clapp of the National Environmental Trust and Frances Beinecke of the Natural Resources Defense Council also rejected the thesis of the two authors, claiming that environmentalism is alive and well, fighting its battles as ever.

However, all of them acknowledged some truth in the paper.

I do not want in this article to enter into the debate caused by the article. I want simply to remark that, as most agree, Shellenberg and Nordhaus’s claim is not complete wrong: Environmentalism in the US has suffered many defeats on high-profile issues. Environmentalists have failed to spark the public’s imagination and to attract public participation over global warming and they are also losing the battle to prevent oil drilling in Alaska’s wild lands. Even

¹ (www.3nov.com/images/report_doe_final.pdf).

² (http://www.sierraclub.org/pressroom/messages/2004december_pope.asp).

George Bush's lack of support for global warming and for environmental issues has failed to galvanise the environmental movement.

However, the picture is not as bad as the two authors paint. Specifically on the central issue of global warming, recent facts seem to contradict the death or even the decline of environmentalism. Pressed by environmental organisations, in August 2005 nine North-Eastern states of the USA came to an important preliminary agreement on climate-change control: freezing of power plant emissions at their current levels, followed by reducing them by 10% until 2020 (enforcement of emission controls could result in higher energy prices in the nine states, which could be offset by subsidies and support for the development of new technology).

Furthermore, something else looks awkward to a European reader: The whole discussion of the death of environmentalism focuses only on the present situation in the United States; neither Shellenberg and Nordhaus, nor their critics pay any attention to the state of environmentalism in Europe, in the rest of the world and in the international arena. In the authors' mind, either the only environmentalism that matters is that of the U.S., or environmentalism exists only in the U.S.

In fact, in the whole article, there is only a short, unsubstantiated observation concerning environmentalism outside the U.S.: "The greatest achievements to reduce global warming are today happening in Europe". Even this apparent acknowledgement is far from correct.

II. Greater achievements in Europe?

On the one hand, the clear position of the **European Union** on implementation of the Kyoto Treaty, although admirable for its genuine support of multilateralism in environmental agreements (in particular in matters as climate-change control), has not been followed by action to compel Member States to meet their respective commitments. As a result, it is now very doubtful if greenhouse emissions will be effectively reduced to the level that the European Union promised to reach. Furthermore, the refusal of the U.S. to ratify the Kyoto Treaty (essentially because there were no provisions of commitments by "underdeveloped" countries), so universally reproached, looks much less censurable today in light of the uncontrolled climate-changing emissions produced by India and above all China to promote their massive industrial development.

Putting aside all these considerations, what I want to explore here is whether the affirmations of Schellenberg and Nordhaus may also have more general validity: Is **environmentalism** also dead in the European Union?

In order to offer an answer it is first necessary to define the word environmentalism. In a strict sense, it is the social movement that seeks to influence the political process in order to protect the environment and to develop a wise and equitable use of natural resources. In a broader meaning, it is the general attitude of all components of the European community, political and legal, as well as administrative agents and institutions, towards the environment.

If we adopt this broader definition the answer may be, at first blush, different from that in the U.S., as described by Shellenberg and Nordhaus: Environmentalism in Europe is certainly not at the death-point.

It is sufficient to consider, for example, the recognition in all official documents of the European Union that the goal, inserted in the Treaty, to guarantee an "higher level of protection of

the environment” is a strong priority; the huge number of **regulations** produced almost daily by the Union to implement this declaration, and the increasing number of entities in charge of the environment or of relevant aspects of it. In fact, in recent years the EU has developed a stronger focus on implementation of environmental regulations and has increased pressure on environmental enforcement agencies to ensure greater compliance with environmental laws and regulations (if compliance relied only on the Member States, regulations would be largely ineffective: sadly, not all Member States have an interest in protecting their own environment).

However, the situation, at this broader level, is not as positive as it first looks. While the goal of a higher level of environmental protection demands that environmental choices are valued as the foundation of all industrial, commercial and agricultural policies, on the contrary it is these policies that increasingly work as the foundation for EU environmental policy: The environment may receive a higher level of protection, but only if it does not hinder the achievement of other relevant goals. This conclusion is confirmed by recent requests of the President of the EU Commission, Barroso, that new environmental legislation should not hamper **business competitiveness** or adversely impact his jobs and growth priority for Europe.

This perspective makes the European environment much less important than before and less protected than needed; it is just one factor to be considered in evaluations which are increasingly focused on economy and growth. Big companies are truly concerned about the future of the environment in which they will operate, but only because different regulations in the Member States alter the “level playing field” of the single market.

On the other hand, regulation is not necessarily a perfect indicator of sound environmental policy. That there is too much regulation is a common criticism. From the market perspective excess regulation reduces the effects of competition and market forces; from a democratic perspective, the EU tends to bypass democratic processes needed to give legitimacy to decision-making, restricting rather than promoting information flow and participation.

The standard rhetoric within the European Union today seems to be “better environmental regulation”. The problem, however, is that “better” regulation means different things to different people. For some, it means more effective or more efficient regulation; for others it simply means “less” regulation; and for still others better regulation is just “cheaper” regulation.

In conclusion, from this perspective environmentalism is not dead, but it is certainly not in very good health.

III. The state of the environmental movement

The situation is worse if we adopt a narrow meaning of environmentalism, restricting our examination – as Shellenberg and Nordhaus do – to social movements seeking to influence the political process.

It is commonly stated that **environmental organisations** – as in the U.S. – are losing their appeal to the general and to the concerned public. One of the main points of failure is, in Europe as in the U.S., climate change and the related energy issue: The necessary reduction of consumption of fossil fuels to avoid climate change would require environmental organisations to propose a severe and unbiased analysis of alternative means to satisfy the needs of the European Community. Simply to claim that we need to expand renewable energy sources

is not sufficient: Everybody knows that **renewables** – although appealing – are costly, require heavy public subsidies and, for a very long time, will not be a suitable substitute for fossil fuels. At the same time, environmental organisations, forgetting that all energy sources have environmental drawbacks – and renewables do not escape this rule – offer an opposition difficult for the general public to understand.

For example, the building of windmills is constantly opposed in many countries of Europe, because wind power plants are noisy, ugly, land-intensive and materials-intensive (concrete and steel, in particular) and constitute a hazard to birds. Hydroelectric energy through dam building is considered a major evil because of the risks borne by the surrounding population. Yet, if the energy problem is to be solved and carbon emissions substantially reduced, all these risks should be carefully weighed against the benefits of production of low-cost clean energy.

Also a more balanced evaluation of energy production from nuclear power would be valuable: Its high economic costs and its safety risks (although reactors of the new generation are cheaper, cleaner and easier to build than old ones) should be weighed against important benefits: electricity generation with no greenhouse-gas emissions and no dependence on unstable areas of the world.

In conclusion, simply to affirm that the Western world has to change its way of life without offering acceptable paths for change does not create support for environmentalism, nor make environmental views more acceptable.

If we turn our attention from the general theme of energy to the implementation of the **Kyoto targets** (one for the whole European Union, but many and different for the Member States), we see that in many Member States environmental organisations are silent, watching their Governments adopt only nominal, sporadic or inefficient measures to comply with the assigned target. They do not have the political force nor the will to oppose policies postponing primary environmental needs, like the control of climate-changing emissions, in favour of short term economic or business goals.

The **energy issue** is not the only one revealing the weakness of the environmental movement. Two other important issues are technological innovation and globalisation.

Environmentalism is increasingly characterised by opposition towards **technological innovation** and scientific progress and the (real or supposed) big “business” behind them, usually justified as a defence of a rigid precautionary principle. Yet, this choice comes with at least three side-effects.

It implies, at first, relying on old technologies, generally riskier and less environmentally friendly than the new ones, and on the political and business groups supporting them (not necessarily greener than the groups supporting new technologies). But aversion to innovation and to risk is not the best way to protect the environment: As shown in Jared Diamond’s recent book *Collapse*, very often societies dissolve and perish because of their incapacity to embrace innovation and their stubborn sticking to a collapsing status-quo.

The second effect is the shift by environmental associations in the political spectrum towards sectors occupied by groups that oppose innovation and science like fundamentalists or defenders of tradition and nationalism. This shift leaves behind the progressive public customarily supportive of environmentalism which believes in the importance of sound science and innovative technology to manage the complex environmental problems of the contemporary world.

The third effect is the growing conflict amongst scientists and environmentalists on topical issues (first of all, the use of GMO in agriculture).

Another good example of the weakness of many European environmental associations is the attitude towards “globalisation”, routinely demonised as an evil and as the cause of the exploitation of the Third World and the degradation of its environment. It is undeniable that the benefits of globalisation have been unevenly spread (1.3 billion people still survive on incomes of less than a dollar a day and the world’s three richest people have a combined wealth greater than the GDPs of the 48 least developed countries) and this is one of the factors that poses the most serious risk for the environment in poor countries. Yet, globalisation is – by itself – neither necessarily good nor bad for the environment. There are threats and opportunities in this relationship for countries, local communities and firms pursuing economic development and environmental protection. Its effects depend on the extent to which environment and globalisation can be made mutually supportive. A positive outcome requires appropriate economic and environmental policies and a clear understanding that fighting poverty and corruption in the Third World is the best way to pursue environmentalism also at home.

Summing up, environmental organisations in Europe seem to have at least partially lost their clear appeal and their original background. They were in the Seventies a progressive and innovative movement, offering the public new possibilities: not just a push towards growth and depletion of natural resources (as always happened in the past, following economic and business interests), but to use science and technology to conserve nature and to improve community life. This was the truly revolutionary proposal that attracted a large part of the public and offered the basis for political and ideological support to Green movements all over Europe.

Not much is left of this appeal today. This does not mean that environmentalism is dead. It means, however, that it is dying a certain way of conceiving environmentalism while a different way is being born.