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The French Left and the Politicization of Environmental Issues

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Abstract

The meeting between the left and ecology was belated, shocked and temporally differentiated. There were three different kinds of behaviours towards ecology, those exhibited by the opponents, the followers and the pioneers. The intersection of three parameters explains this typology: the relation of these organizations to the notion of modernity, the relation to Marxism, and the notion of revolutionary optimism.

Keywords

Communism, far left, left, political ecology, socialism

In France, two elements contribute to a very strong link between environmentalism and the left. The first is political positioning. It is true that French political environmentalism has always consisted of two faces, one clearly left-wing, the other claiming a non-political position or looking towards alliances on the right. However, the former has tended to continually take precedence. Though French political environmentalism does not bear the traditional hallmarks of the left, seeking a new image, it does so while always remaining within the scope of a left-wing ideology, in the broadest sense of the term.

Elements of the past support this political observation. As the astute observer of French politics, Jean-Luc Parodi, notes: ‘In many ways, environmentalism appeared as

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the finally-structured ideological heritage of May [1968] in France'.¹ From Daniel Cohn-Bendit to Brice Lalonde and Alain Lipietz, many individual cases have certainly exemplified the role played by former left-wing activists in creating and then building the ranks of the environmentalist movement.

But this spontaneously identified link between the left and environmentalism is far from obvious if we broaden the time frame to include, in particular, the period in and around 1968, those two decades surrounding the events of May 1968. Indeed, the French left was originally reticent regarding the issue of environmentalism. It subsequently converted, but hesitatingly, unequally and incompletely. This conversion was all the more difficult and differentiated given the divided nature of the French left at this time. There were three main leanings, of very different importance: communism, reformist socialism and the far left. Such divisions also caused a conversion that was spread over a long period.

When did the topic of environmentalism appear within the French left? Nothing happened before the 1960s. Apart from a few marginal figures, the entire French left of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century shared a vision of productivity-based development and a progressive view of history.

This began to change, very slowly, from the 1960s. Change came, in particular, at a varying rate and intensity according to political leanings. In his classic work, *L'introuvable écologisme français*, Guillaume Sainteny devoted a few pages to this phenomenon, though overlooking the episode which represents the prelude to his subject and working in a general outline, he put aside a few nuances which make it impossible to speak comprehensively of 'the Left' because, in reality, the attitude towards the environmental question was multifaceted.² In fact, with regard to the ecological theme, such was the extent of the variation of the taking into account of environmentalism that it is possible to differentiate three groups that I will identify as follows: the opponents, the followers and the pioneers.

But, in order to understand the difficult acclimatization of the French left to environmentalist thinking, it should be highlighted that the different currents of the left did not have the same power. The major specificity of the French left in the twentieth century was the fact that it included an extremely powerful Communist current. This explains why the main alternative organizations of the left originated in this current and fostered neo-Leninist options (Trotskyist or Maoist) deeply steeped in traditional communist political culture. This also largely explains why French reformist socialism has always been characterized by a certain element of shame. In France, there was no Karl Kautsky to attack head-on the terrorist roots of Bolshevism, no Bad-Godesberg to break away from Marxist patristics, no Noske or Helmut Schmidt to counter without hesitation the far left of the time, but a constant tug-of-war between revolutionary proclamations from the opposition and a highly reformist approach from those in power.

¹ Quoted by Jean-Paul Deléage, 'Écologistes et alternatifs' in Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar, eds, *Histoire des gauches en France* (Paris 2004), 149.

² Guillaume Sainteny, *L'introuvable écologisme français* (Paris 2000), 45.

This Communist hegemony was very briefly challenged by the rise of the left after 1968, before being so, decisively and powerfully, by the Socialist left from 1981. Up to then, the *Parti communiste français (PCF)* was by far the most powerful political force in the French left. And it was precisely this political force that was the most hostile to the topic of environmentalism. It constitutes the backbone of the first group that can be observed, the opponents.

The Opponents

The Communist Allergy to Environmentalism

The reference text of any communist party remains the report which its secretary general presents at the opening of every congress. Up until 1968, in this major source, the topic of environmentalism remains absent. As an example, it can be noted that, in 1964, the secretary general of the party called for the ‘creation of a great atomic industry oriented towards pacific production’.³ After 1968, environmentalism is mentioned by communist leaders, but in an accusatory form. Let’s listen to the leader of the party, Georges Marchais, in 1972, refusing the environmental warning which Sicco Mansholt has just issued:

We tell the workers of our country: produce more and you will have a better life! They are exhausting themselves to do this but their buying power has not moved an inch. And here we are now we are saying to them: the growth of production may cause the worst catastrophes, overpopulation, pollution, the depletion of natural resources. Men in positions of responsibility, such as Mr Mansholt, tell us to slow down the growth of production and consumption. The Malthusianism of old is back. The only purpose of all these explanations is to distract the attention of our people.⁴

According to the communist leaders, the subject of excess growth was a plot by the right and European social democrats to oppose workers’ demands. This same approach continued in 1977, with a strong denouncement of ecological concerns:

Today, the ideologists of the bourgeoisie have turned into prophets of catastrophe. They say we are on the brink of a shortage of energy sources, of food supplies. That we have consumed too much, wasted too much! That growth that is too fast is the source of all evil.

The truth’, Georges Marchais continues, ‘is that the resources of nature and human intelligence are vast and their limits yet unknown’, before delivering his major conclusion: ‘It is not growth that wastes nature, the lives and hopes of men, it is capitalism’.⁵ According to Jean Jacob, with a certain sense of understatement, ‘The French Communist Party

³ *XVIIe congrès du Parti communiste français, Cahiers du Communisme*, special issue, June–July 1964, 46.

⁴ *XXe congrès du Parti communiste français, Cahiers du Communisme*, special issue, Jan.–Feb. 1973, 28–9.

⁵ Georges Marchais, *Parlons franchement* (Paris 1977), 192–4.

apparently was at first not very receptive to the ecological theses developed in the early 1970s'.⁶

However, in 1979, the *PCF* changed and adopted environmentalism. The latter is no longer viewed as a trap used by capitalism but a justifiable preoccupation: 'As science and technology reach unprecedented new heights, underdevelopment, misery and hunger grow in the world. Natural resources are wasted. Damage to the environment is increasing, with the risk of causing irreparable destruction in the natural world'.⁷ However, this adoption of environmentalism did not address a considerable blind spot; the *PCF* would never go as far as separating the environmental question from the capitalism-socialism contradiction. Communist leaders would never write that socialism, in itself, does not naturally and necessarily solve the issue of the environment, not even during the 27th congress, held in December 1990, when the *PCF* analyzed the failure of the socialist system.⁸

But the *PCF* was not the only group to display this allergy to the issue of environmentalism. Within the divisions that appeared around 1968, many far-left groups shared this reluctance, or even hostility.

Left-Wing Hostility

The essential characteristic of those I call the 'left-wing opponents' is the delay in their adoption of environmentalism, which was not taken up until 1977–1978.⁹ In other words, their chronology remains very similar to that of the *PCF*. It is also interesting to note that this dismissive attitude can be identified in all families of the left-wing spectrum at the time, from the anarchists, to the Trotskyists to the Maoists.

For the anarchists, we can take the example of the *Organisation communiste libertaire (OCL)*. For the whole of its existence, from 1971 to 1975, its periodical publication *Guerre de classes* published just one article criticizing pollution, an article linked to an anarchist, anti-military discourse.¹⁰ The same hostile attitude was present in another anarchist organization, the result of a split in the *Organisation révolutionnaire anarchiste (ORA)* in 1976, the *Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires (UTCL)*. The first issues of its publication are silent on the subject of environmentalism. Only in the summer of 1977 did the organization truly adopt a revolutionary environmental approach,¹¹ which in no way constituted an important pillar for the organization. Again, in 1981, none of the nine pillars of the action programme of the *UTCL* concern the environment.¹²

⁶ Jean Jacob, *Histoire de l'écologie politique* (Paris 1999), 271.

⁷ *XXIIIe congrès du Parti communiste français, Cahiers du Communisme*, special issue, June–July 1979, 33.

⁸ *XXVIIe congrès du Parti communiste français, Cahiers du Communisme*, special issue, Jan.–Feb. 1991, 19–41.

⁹ For a global history of the movement, see Philippe Buton, *Histoire du gauchisme. L'héritage de Mai 68* (Paris 2021).

¹⁰ 'Les essais nucléaires du Pacifique', *Guerre de classes* 6, Oct. 1973.

¹¹ 'Les mobilisations de l'été', *Tout le pouvoir aux travailleurs* 7, 15 Sept. 1977.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43, 15 Nov.–15 Dec. 1981.

These opponents also included an important Trotskyist organization, the *Organisation communiste internationaliste (OCI)*. Its weekly journal, *Informations ouvrières*, did not mention the environment, except in a critical context. In May 1972, in January 1973 and again in July 1977, under the title ‘*la réaction verte*’ (the green reaction), Alexandre Hebert, the union activist with strong ties to the Trotskyists of the *OCI*, stigmatized the reactionary nature of environmentalists and supported nuclear energy.¹³ A few weeks later, reporting on the demonstration at Creys-Malville, the publication maintained its hostility towards political environmentalism.¹⁴ However, even an organization such as the *OCI* began to be receptive to environmental issues. The journal indicated that the article by A. Hebert provoked such a flood of letters that it was decided to start a debate, fuelled mainly by an anti-environmentalist article by a leader, but also by an environmentalist article by a reader.¹⁵ This marks the beginning of a small opening and, from then on, the environment took its place in the pages of the journal.¹⁶

However, despite the presence of these anarchist and Trotskyist organizations, the majority of this category of opponents consisted of what I would term Mao-Stalinist organizations. All the Maoist journals published before 1968 (*L’Humanité nouvelle*, *Tribune rouge*, *Garde rouge* and *Servir le peuple*) or after 1968 (*Drapeau rouge*, *Front rouge*, *L’Humanité rouge*, *Le Marxiste-Léniniste* and *Le Prolétaire Ligne rouge*) remained closed to the question of the environment long after other far-left publications.

The example of *Drapeau Rouge* is interesting to examine in more depth. It was originally a Maoist organization located in Brittany – its initial name was *Rennes Révolutionnaire* – and, thus, very much aware of environmental disasters. Indeed, the first issue of *Drapeau rouge* included a clear criticism of polluting capitalism.¹⁷ However, nothing significant was published for a long time: a reference made during a keynote speech at a meeting in spring 1973,¹⁸ a brief article on an oil spill in January 1977¹⁹ and a full-page article in May 1977.²⁰ Only in the summer of 1977, on the occasion of the march to Malville, was a long overview article published. The article remained very balanced, along the lines of ‘No to capitalist nuclear power, yes to a socialist nuclear future’: ‘It is not nuclear energy that is dangerous, it is the bourgeoisie who use it in a reckless way’.²¹ The same approach was taken by another organization, the *Prolétaire ligne rouge*, who only addressed the question in November 1973 in a truly anti-ecological article: ‘Contrary to the claims of many bourgeois “experts”, the world’s energy reserves

¹³ *Informations ouvrières*, respectively 566, May 1972; 594, Jan. 1973; 811, 20 July 1977.

¹⁴ *Informations ouvrières* 813, 10 Aug. 1977.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Informations ouvrières*, 814, 818, 832, 833, 835, 837 in 1977 and 1978; see Alain Dubois, *Ecologie, marxisme et lambertisme* (2018).

¹⁷ ‘La pourriture de la société capitaliste en France’, *Drapeau rouge* 1, Nov. 1971.

¹⁸ *Drapeau rouge* 34, 8 June 1973.

¹⁹ ‘Bohlen: du pétrole et des idées’, *Drapeau rouge* 3, 14 Jan. 1977.

²⁰ ‘Ekofisk: un accident ?’, *Drapeau rouge* 11, 9 May 1977.

²¹ ‘Malville’, *Drapeau rouge* 16, Aug. 1977.

are considerable. Just the sources known and harnessed today would be enough for centuries, not counting nuclear energy, solar energy, etc.²²

Similarly, the two main Maoist organizations (the two parts of the *PCMLF*, *L'Humanité rouge* and *Front rouge*) supported the struggle of the farmers of the Larzac in 1973, but did not mention its environmental dimension, focusing on the farmer question and anti-militarism.²³ The following year, *Front rouge* maintained its position,²⁴ while *L'Humanité rouge* stopped supporting the struggle of the Larzac, by refusing anti-militarism, as it had converted to national defence.²⁵ The internal bulletins of these two organizations, from October 1970 to September 1976, remained silent on the question of the environment. The last Maoist group of note, led by Alain Badiou, was even slower at integrating the environment into its areas of action. For six and a half years, its involvement in environmental issues remained limited (eight articles) and, in particular, very late; the first article, a call to demonstrate at Malville, was published in June 1977.²⁶

However, these Maoists did express themselves, occasionally, on the environment. The leadership of *PCRml* (formerly *PCMLF-Front rouge*) outsourced this question to its youth organization, the *Union communiste de la jeunesse révolutionnaire (UCJR)*, and the first issue of its journal, *Rebelles*, in February 1976, included two pages on nuclear energy and the environment. Similarly, in April 1978, a commando unit of this same *UCJR* threw black paint on the facade of Shell in Paris, to protest against the oil spill of the *Amoco Cadiz*, an action for which it implicitly claimed responsibility in its journal, which, for the occasion, devoted its front page to the question of the environment.²⁷ A sign of a general trend, the same month, *Drapeau rouge* also devoted its front page to the oil spill.²⁸ From 1978, the Maoists thus opened up to environmental issues. But this opening up remained limited because, in fact, all these groups adopted the same approach as the *PCF*. There was no substantial questioning on the issue of the environment, or its many implications, but a simple instrumentalization of a subject that French people were starting to like.

The Followers

The second category which I have identified is that of the followers. These organizations added the issue of the environment as another weapon to their anti-capitalist artillery but their commitment to this cause remained at quite a low level compared to that which they displayed in relation to other subject areas, such as students and workers. This category includes several anarchist and Trotskyist groups.

²² 'La crise de l'énergie: l'impérialisme est responsable!', *Le Prolétaire ligne rouge* 2, 15 Nov. 1973.

²³ *L'Humanité rouge* 194, 25 July–5 Sept. 1973; *Front rouge* 82, 13 Sept. 1973.

²⁴ *Front rouge*, 'spécial paysans', July–Aug. 1974 and 123, 6 Sept. 1974.

²⁵ *L'Humanité rouge* 240, 12 Sept. 1974. The title is: 'Il faut renforcer la Défense nationale'.

²⁶ 'On a raison de se révolter contre l'électro-nucléaire capitaliste!', *Le Marxiste-Léniniste* 17, June 1977.

²⁷ *Rebelles* 9, April 1978.

²⁸ 'Noire la mer, rouge notre colère', *Drapeau rouge* 34, 8 April 1978.

Anarchist Reluctance

Before 1968, political anarchism was always entirely represented by the *Fédération anarchiste (FA)* (anarchist federation) and its monthly publication, *Le Monde libertaire*. This newspaper appears highly paradoxical. While the anarchist journalists would be expected to be naturally drawn towards environmentalist thinking, until spring 1968, no article explicitly addressed this issue.

The first reason for expecting environmentalist thinking to appear in the anarchist press is the opening of the latter to the various social issues which sprouted in the existential subversion which preceded 1968. The anarchist newspaper thus published articles on the oppression of women, contraception and sexuality.²⁹ It also published articles on subjects which generally constituted gateways to initial environmentalist thinking, for example overpopulation, leisure activities and urban planning.³⁰ However, environmentalist thought was absent from its line of argument. It came close to making an appearance in an important article on the concept of progress, a theme so close to the hearts of liberals and Marxists and so anathema to environmentalist thinkers. Out of context, some extracts of this article by Maurice Laisant could easily be considered environmentalist: 'If progress reduces man to the manufacture of many futile objects imposed by a senseless economy, if it creates in him unnecessary desires for commercial ends, if it stirs in him frantic agitation, encouraging unnecessary creation, what good is progress?'³¹ But, apart from the fact that this article was quite alone among all the issues of the *Monde libertaire*, it did not produce any concrete results on a practical level, or systematic results on a theoretical level.

What is even more surprising is the way in which *Le Monde libertaire* addressed the movement of the Dutch Provos, a movement which constituted, among others, the first large-scale environmentalist movement in Europe, notably through its different 'white plans'.³² The anarchist newspaper devoted significant editorial space to this movement, with almost ten articles in the period 1966–1967, and the front page in July 1966, quite considerable for a monthly publication.³³ However, as numerous as the articles are, highlighting the anarchist inspiration of the Provos, occasionally calling on its readers to follow their example, not one discussed the environmentalist dimension of the movement.

After 1968, the hesitant anarchist approach continued. However, in November 1969, *Le Monde libertaire* published an unabashedly environmentalist front page, '*Tas de cons... ça existe encore les oiseaux!*' (You idiots – birds still exist!).³⁴ Others criticized

²⁹ *Le Monde libertaire*, respectively 108, Jan. 1965; 129, Feb. 1967 on the first issue; 116, Nov. 1965; 117, Dec. 1965; 138, Jan. 1968 on the second; 125, Sept. 1966; 129, Feb. 1967 on the third.

³⁰ *Le Monde libertaire*, respectively 108, Jan. 1965; 124, July–Aug. 1966; 128, Jan. 1967.

³¹ *Le Monde libertaire* 131, April 1967.

³² See Yves Frémion, *Provo. Amsterdam 1965–1967* (Paris 2009).

³³ *Le Monde libertaire* 123, June 1966; 124, July–Aug. 1966; 125, Sept. 1966; 130, March 1967; 135, Sept.–Oct. 1967; 136, Nov. 1967.

³⁴ *Le Monde libertaire* 155, Nov. 1969.

modern urban planning,³⁵ while the first feature article was published in May 1972 under a decidedly anarchist title: ‘*Tout Etat pollue*’ (All states pollute).³⁶ But such statements remained modest until 1974. In 1973, the congress of the *Fédération anarchiste* (anarchist federation) did not mention the environment. This step was only taken at the next congress, in 1974, when, for the first time, the question of the environment appeared as a major issue.³⁷ The federation then created a ‘*commission écologiste*’ (environmental commission) which, in November 1974, published an issue of *Monde libertaire* focusing, for the first time, mainly on this issue.³⁸ The first calls for environmental demonstrations only came in 1977. The anarchist newspaper called on its readers to go to Malville to voice their opposition to the construction of the new nuclear plant, and published several articles on the meeting, while it had made no mention of the meeting of 1976.³⁹

This reluctance is even more obvious among less traditional libertarian organizations. The groups which appeared in the 1970s, who wanted to modernize the old anarchism of the *Fédération anarchiste*, and were often open to crypto-Marxist thinking, were even more closed to environmentalism than the mothership. The first signs of environmentalist thinking appeared in *Front libertaire*, the publication of the *Organisation révolutionnaire anarchiste (ORA)*, in 1972, with two articles on the Larzac, followed by one on pollution in March 1973 and two more on nuclear energy in May 1973 and February 1974.⁴⁰ It was only in the summer of 1974 that the environment became a truly central theme in the newspaper. From then on, articles on the subject appeared regularly,⁴¹ including some controversial ones, such as the issue of December 1974 whose explicit title, ‘*L’idéologie réactionnaire dans le mouvement écologiste*’ (Reactionary ideology in the environmentalist movement), caused some debate in the pages of the publication.⁴² In reality, the rise in environmental awareness was accompanied by an important objective – to create a division within the environmentalist movement between revolutionaries and reformists.

However, the majority of the ‘followers’ category consists of the main left-wing organization at the time, the *Ligue communiste* (Communist league).

³⁵ ‘Du lapinisme à la cage à poules’; ‘Parking humain’, *Le Monde libertaire* 159, March 1970; 171, May 1971.

³⁶ *Le Monde libertaire* 181, May 1972.

³⁷ *Le Monde libertaire*, respectively 192, July–Aug. 1973 and 203, July–Aug. 1974.

³⁸ *Le Monde libertaire* 206, Nov. 1974.

³⁹ *Le Monde libertaire* 235, July–Aug. 1977; 236, Sept. 1977.

⁴⁰ ‘Main basse sur le Larzac’; ‘Larzac: nous parions sur la vie et non sur la mort’; ‘Le capitalisme continue à nous empoisonner’; ‘Plus notre dose de radio-activité augmente, plus elle nous diminue’; ‘Industrie nucléaire’, *Front libertaire des luttes de classes* 17, May–June 1972; 19, 15 Oct. 1972; 25, 8 March 1973; 28, 26 May 1973; 31, Feb. 1974.

⁴¹ ‘L’énergétique’; ‘Larzac 74’; ‘Manif anti-nucléaire à Pierrelatte’; ‘L’industrie nucléaire, solution au chômage?’; ‘L’uranium enrichi... enrichit le capital’, *Front libertaire des luttes de classes* 34, June–Aug. 1974; 35, Oct. 1974; 38, 24 Jan. 1975; 40, April 1975; 42, June 1975.

⁴² ‘L’idéologie réactionnaire dans le mouvement écologique’; ‘*Courrier écologique*’, *Front libertaire des luttes de classes* 35, Oct. 1974; 38, 24 Jan. 1975.

The Trotskyists: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Before 1968, the first Trotskyist organizations (the JCR, the PCI, *Voix ouvrière* and, of course, the OCI, which we have already discussed) remained completely closed to environmentalism. This began to change progressively from 1972, as shown by a study of the newspaper of the *Ligue communiste, Rouge*. The analysis of these 359 issues, published from 18 September 1968 to 5 March 1976⁴³ reveals the initial low level occupied by environmental issues, then the gradual change in this attitude.⁴⁴

For three and a half years it was not mentioned, as certainty regarding the impending revolution took precedence. A new period, a period of hesitation, began in April 1972. From then on, occasionally but regularly (every 15 weeks, approximately), the paper discussed environmental issues. This did not constitute a frenzy, but the contempt was now absent. In April 1972, the paper covered the first bicycle protest against pollution in Paris. Under the surprising title, '*Pas de chambres à gaz, des chambres à air*' (No more gas chambers but air tubes instead), the article declared this protest a '*heureuse initiative*' (happy initiative).⁴⁵ On 24 June 1972, the first feature article on the question of the environment, a commentary on the letter of Sicco Mansholt, appeared. But the article in *Rouge* went beyond discussing current events, it occupied two full pages and was written by the most eminent Trotskyist theorist at the time, the Belgian leader of the *IVe Internationale*, Ernest Mandel.⁴⁶ The aim of the *Ligue* is clear. To silence independent social movements, it took on the role of environmental advocate. Its objective varied: at best, to lead the protest movement, or at least, to spark a revolutionary environmental movement. This explains why the leaders strived to create a division between reformism and revolution within the movement. It would have been a shame not to use this additional anti-capitalist argument, which did not necessarily require transforming the revolutionary party into a reformist movement.

The delay in the conversion of the *Ligue* to environmentalism is all the more evident if we consider its internal bulletin. Between 1970 and 1977,⁴⁷ the question of the environment was not really broached in the internal bulletin until the summer of 1977. This increased interest can be easily explained by the rise in the independent environmentalist movement: 'Given the development of the environmentalist movement, the extent of the anti-nuclear protests and their political importance, the LCR must declare its positions', wrote a supporter.⁴⁸

⁴³ To the 337 issues of the weekly paper, we have added the 22 issues of a first attempt at daily publication, during the 1974 presidential campaign. From March 1976, *Rouge* was temporarily published daily.

⁴⁴ The *Ligue communiste* (then LCR) was the subject matter of a doctoral thesis of good quality. But its author only studied the rise in awareness about the environment from 1976. See Jean-Paul Salles, *La Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (1968–1981). Instrument du Grand Soir ou lieu d'apprentissage?* (Rennes 2005), 223.

⁴⁵ *Rouge* 155, 29 April 1972.

⁴⁶ 'Ecologie et lutte de classes. La bombe Mansholt. La grande peur de l'an 2000', *Rouge* 163, 24 June 1972.

⁴⁷ The collections consulted at the *Centre d'histoire du travail* in Nantes are not complete. Thus, I cannot definitively exclude the possibility that the consultation of the few missing issues would slightly modify the conclusions presented here.

⁴⁸ 'Socialisme ou barbarie', *Discussions et débats* 69, Aug. 1977.

From this point on, the *LCR* had two stances on the environment, depending on whether analysis is based on its public rhetoric or internal practices. Publicly, there was no more hesitation. The *Ligue* and its publications began to regularly discuss environmental issues. The 1977 programme gave them an important place, one of the ten chapters in this weighty book of 397 pages.⁴⁹ But, at the same time, the organization did not follow suit. Despite the lip-service it paid to a popular theme, at its heart, the *Ligue*'s contempt for that theme, too far from its original political culture, persisted, as illustrated by Jean-Paul Deléage's failure.

Converted to political environmentalism during the fight against asbestos at the *Université de Jussieu* in Paris, where he was an assistant professor, Deléage led the integration of this subject within the organization. He fought for the *LCR* to truly take environmentalism to heart. He published several articles but sensed he was facing a blank wall of lip-service with a complete lack of understanding.⁵⁰ The *Ligue* remained true to its core belief, that environmentalism was a justified cause which the imminent revolution would address. In the meantime, however, it would detract from the main goal, namely the victory of the working class.

With a tone slightly more conciliatory than that of its rival, *Lutte ouvrière* developed a similar approach. From the summer of 1971, articles were published on pollution, reckless urban planning and housing problems. Such articles then became regular and relatively frequent.⁵¹ The magazine was thus the first Trotskyist publication to devote its front page to environmental issues, including urbanism in July 1971, the pollution caused by French military nuclear activity, international environmental catastrophes, the management of everyday life and, finally, in July 1977, civil nuclear power.⁵² Even though the Trotskyist organization now included the environment among its anti-capitalist weaponry, this did not constitute a rallying to the cause of political environmentalism, as proven by the first feature article bearing the very clear title: '*L'écologie politique: un apolitisme réactionnaire*' (Political environmentalism: reactionary political indifference).⁵³ But the article provoked such a reaction among its readers that the newspaper was forced to address this reaction in subsequent issues, and it increased the number of articles on pollution.

The chronology of the environmental conversion of the Trotsky-Maoist organization *Révolution* is similar, the first feature article being published relatively late, as for *Lutte ouvrière*, in the summer of 1974.⁵⁴ This text illustrates the typical characteristics of the left-wing approach to political environmentalism, namely criticism of reactionary

⁴⁹ Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, *Oui, le socialisme!* (Paris 1978).

⁵⁰ Interview Jean-Paul Deléage, 2 Dec. 2010.

⁵¹ Respectively 'Vierzon. Les habitants des "Forges" luttent contre la pollution'; 'La Saône empoisonnée: quand le profit passe avant tout'; 'Main basse sur la ville. Les promoteurs sont les casseurs'; 'Bugey-cobbayes', *Lutte ouvrière* 149, 6 July 1971; 150, 13 July 1971; 151, 20 July 1971.

⁵² Respectively 'Main basse sur la ville. Les promoteurs sont les casseurs'; 'Mururoa: pollution pour toute la terre, profits pour quelques-uns'; 'Inondation au Bangladesh, incendies de forêts en France, sécheresse en Afrique. La société capitaliste aggrave les catastrophes naturelles quand la science pourrait les réduire'; 'Au-delà des vacances, se donner le temps et les moyens de vivre', *Lutte ouvrière* 150, 13 July 1971; 256, 24 July 1973; 313, 27 Aug. 1974; 464, 23 July 1977; 465, 30 July 1977.

⁵³ *Lutte ouvrière* 303, 18 June 1974.

⁵⁴ 'Écologie: socialisme ou barbarie', *Révolution!* 62, 5 July 1974.

environmentalists, a vision of the revolution as the unique solution and mistrust of concrete struggles because 'in bourgeois society, the struggle against nuisances, against pollution, can only result in stagnation, unemployment, and an increase in the gap between the rich and the poor'.⁵⁵ However, *Révolution* then proceeded to adopt a clearer position, ten articles being devoted to the subject in 1975 alone.⁵⁶

Finally, in addition to these categories of the opponents and the followers, there exists a final category, that of the pioneers.

The Pioneers

I use this term pioneers to refer to organizations who demonstrated an openness to environmental considerations quite early on and who did not simply propose the magical solution of revolutionary eschatology but who wished to obtain immediate results. This category is also a multifaceted one, consisting of a reformist party (the *PS*), some far-left groups and a hybrid party (the *Parti socialiste unifié*).

Environmental Leftism

The *Parti socialiste unifié* (*PSU*), founded in 1960 as a splinter group of the *Parti socialiste*, was undeniably the first and most consistent non-environmental political party to take the path of environmentalism.

Up to 1968, the *PSU*'s publication, *Tribune socialiste*, was the newspaper which appeared the most open to societal issues. The weekly publication published many articles on the role of women in society,⁵⁷ issues of contraception⁵⁸ or sexuality.⁵⁹ In particular, the *Tribune socialiste* addressed environmental issues, in the broadest sense of the term, early on and with regularity, devoting many articles to the issues of housing, property speculation and land planning.⁶⁰ The environmentalist association of the newspaper became even stronger in 1967. In March, an article was published on water, a subject undeniably environmental, even if the article did not include the word 'environment'.⁶¹ In June 1967, another example was published, an article on noise, under the rather heterodox title in the heady days of the *30 Glorieuses* (30 boom years): 'Où est le progrès?' (Where is the progress?).⁶²

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ 'Polluer sans temps mort...'; 'Le capitalisme dans l'ère nucléaire'; 'Halte au programme nucléaire'; 'Les antinucléaires dans la rue'; 'Main basse sur la ville'; 'Attention nucléaire'; 'La sûreté des centrales'; 'Douce, douce, l'énergie'; 'Mobilisations anti-nucléaires'; 'Coup de force à Braud-Saint-Louis', *Révolution!* 82, 14 Feb. 1975; 86, 14 March 1975; 91, 25 April 1975; 92, 30 April 1975; 94, 16 May 1975; 96, 30 May 1975; 97, 6 June 1975; 101, 11 July 1975; 114, 28 Nov. 1975.

⁵⁷ *Tribune socialiste* 310, 12 Jan. 1967; 326, 4 May 1967.

⁵⁸ *Tribune socialiste* 279, 26 March 1966; 309, 5 Jan. 1967.

⁵⁹ *Tribune socialiste* 298, 22 Oct. 1966.

⁶⁰ For instance, in the year of 1965 alone, *Tribune socialiste* 239, 8 May 1965; 248, 10 July 1965; 262, 27 Nov. 1965.

⁶¹ *Tribune socialiste* 317, 2 March 1967.

⁶² *Tribune socialiste* 329, 18 June 1967.

Notwithstanding this highly positive image that I have painted, it is important to highlight a significant negative point. All that I have written is correct but only concerns the press. Environmental concerns did not yet touch that holy of holies, the political manifesto. The manifesto of the *PSU*, published in January 1967, is highly institutional and characterized by a philosophy highly focused on production. It contains no element specifically devoted to the environment.⁶³

The move towards explicit environmentalism began after the events of May. From the end of 1969, the *PSU* regularly launched campaigns on the theme of ‘quality of life’⁶⁴ and the *Tribune socialiste* was one of the few newspapers to react to the creation of an environment ministry in 1971, and then to unreservedly support the anti-pollution bicycle protests.⁶⁵ More and more explicitly environmentalist articles began to appear. From 1971, its programme focused heavily on the issue of quality of life,⁶⁶ but it was only in 1975 that the party issued its first clearly environmental posters.⁶⁷

Among these groups of pioneers, there are also some Maoists, those usually referred to as ‘spontaneist Maoists’, who distance themselves from the Stalinist matrix of Maoism, crossing it with a highly libertarian influence, giving precedence to the spontaneity of the people over the omniscience of the Party. Both organizations, *Vive la Révolution (VLR)* and *La Gauche prolétarienne (GP)*, discovered the subject of environmentalism quite early on. As early as January 1971, the first step was taken by *Tout* when it discussed the creation in France of a ministry of the environment, in an article with a provocative title, ‘*Un ministère de la merde*’, illustrated by a photograph of two lovers wearing gas masks in front of the Eiffel Tower. Also, in the summer of 1971, *VLR* activists were present at the anti-nuclear demonstration at Bugey,⁶⁸ evidencing the early interest in the environment within this Maoist organization.⁶⁹

As early as February 1971, *La Gauche prolétarienne* also criticized pollution levels in *J’Accuse*, taking the example of Lyon, then, in May, the example of Grenoble.⁷⁰ The following year, *La Cause du Peuple* discussed environmental themes such as housing or urban planning and supported the first bicycle demonstration.⁷¹ The *GP* did not settle for criticism. It was also a force behind important local struggles. From June 1970, the Nantes Maoists participated actively in the fight to protect the banks of the river Erdre, of which 40 of its 50 kms were not accessible to

⁶³ *Tribune socialiste* 311, 19 Jan. 1967.

⁶⁴ ‘L’opération “cadre de vie” du PSU’, *Bulletin hebdomadaire de la DCRG*, 5 Feb. 1972.

⁶⁵ *Tribune socialiste*, respectively 480, 14 Jan. 1971 and 540, 31 May 1972.

⁶⁶ J-P. Deléage, op. cit., 147–8.

⁶⁷ *Le PSU s’affiche. 30 ans d’affiches politiques* (Paris 2013), 55.

⁶⁸ ‘Fournier t’es un con’, *Tout* 16, 29 July 1971.

⁶⁹ *Tout* 8, 1 Feb. 1971. Cf. also ‘Le capital pollue?’, *Tout* 9, 18 Feb. 1971.

⁷⁰ ‘Lyon: l’industrialisation sauvage’; ‘Pollution à Grenoble. Le poison de l’an 2000’, *J’Accuse* 2, 15 Feb. 1971; 5, 1 May 1971.

⁷¹ ‘Résolvons la crise du logement!’; ‘Changeons la ville’; ‘Un million de vélos gratuits’, *La Cause du Peuple – J’Accuse* 21, 25 March 1972; 23, 1 May 1972.

walkers.⁷² The following year, their comrades in Grenoble created a ‘*comité anti-pollueurs*’ (anti-pollution committee), which led a large-scale campaign against the pollution caused by the Progil factory in Pont-de-Claix, with residents, workers and trade unionists.⁷³

Simultaneously, the leadership of the *GP* tried to link all these popular struggles, including the environmental, even if this word is not mentioned, together with the themes of auto-organization and immediate social transformation:

There is a fil rouge linking the *OS* who impose work-station rotation and thus the collectivist ideology against the system of division on the assembly line, and the poor families who are occupying the building on rue Jacquier or, for a weekend, part of the area of Belleville, and are thus inventing a new system of relationships between the people in a building, in an area. These *OS*, those in poor housing and the young people who demonstrated by bicycle against the monstrosities of the city, polluted by cars and selfishness, all have something in common. They share a desire to change life.⁷⁴

A year later, contrary to the previous year, and publicly this time, the leadership of the *GP* included conservationists in the front line of the popular struggle around the Larzac.⁷⁵ However, this environmental investment was not really highlighted in the Maoist newspaper. *La Gauche prolétarienne* produced no feature article and no general reflection on the environment.

This is not the case with the last pioneer group, a small Trotskyist movement, linked to Michel Raptis known as Pablo, grouped at the time within the *Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire (AMR)*, whose newspaper published, in March 1971, a feature article on pollution, stating, in April 1972, that ‘*la lutte contre la pollution n’est pas une diversion capitaliste*’ (the fight against pollution is not a capitalist diversion).⁷⁶

The Socialist Conversion

Now over to the *parti socialiste*. Concerning its links with environmentalism, the historiography would appear strict,⁷⁷ too strict even, if we place the socialist positions among all the positions of the left, as we are doing at present.

⁷² ‘Pique-nique sauvage sur les bords de l’Erdre’, *La Cause du Peuple – J’Accuse* 5, 21 June 1971; see the testimony of Jean-Paul Cruse in Virginie Linhart, *Volontaires pour l’usine. Vies d’établis 1967–1977* (Paris 2010), 139–46, and the archives of the *Bureau départemental de liaison de la Loire-Atlantique*, 4 June 1970. AN 19910194/6.

⁷³ Archives of the *Bureau départemental de liaison de l’Isère*, 1 Dec. 1971. AN 19910194/6. See also Josselin Sibille, ‘Le vert et le rouge: l’émergence du mouvement écologiste grenoblois’, *La pierre et l’écrit. Revue d’histoire et du patrimoine en Dauphiné* 24, 2013.

⁷⁴ *Rapport général*, May 1972. Archives La Contemporaine (Nanterre). Folio delta 701/4-5.

⁷⁵ *La Cause du Peuple – J’Accuse* 48, 13 Sept. 1973.

⁷⁶ ‘L’environnement, un vrai problème mais pas de réelle solution capitaliste’; ‘Rapport Mansholt: la lutte contre la pollution n’est pas une diversion capitaliste’, *L’Internationale* 9, March 1971; 20, 19 April 1972.

⁷⁷ See Timothée Duverger, *Le Parti socialiste et l’écologie, 1968–2011* (Paris 2011) and Hélène Hatzfeld, ‘Le Parti socialiste, un parti de type nouveau?’, in Noëlline Castagnez and Gilles Morin, eds, *Le Parti socialiste d’Epinay à l’Elysée, 1971–1981* (Rennes 2015), 235–46.

In order to study the evolution of the *parti socialiste*, I examined its congress, but, being a much more pluralist party than the *PCF*, I examined not only the report presented by the leadership, but also the motions adopted and all the speeches made.

The debates of congress in the early 1960s reveal the absence of environmental considerations within the *SFIO*. The first truly environmental speech that was delivered in a socialist congress was that of Maurice Deixonne in July 1969. I will only quote one part of his considerable speech, where he denounced '*la disparition progressive [...] du milieu biologique naturel dans lequel l'homme vit, dont il a besoin, et qui devrait être une des sources essentielles de nos préoccupations actuelles*' (the gradual disappearance [...] of the natural biological environment in which man lives, which he needs, and which should be one of our main considerations today). But all the more significant is the atmosphere in which he made his speech. After a few minutes, the chairman was obliged to intervene: '*Faites un peu de silence, je vous en prie*' (Silence, please, I beg of you), the report indicates, and he is obliged to repeat this some time later: '*Ecoutez, faites silence!*' (Please be silent!) '*C'est très désagréable de parler dans cette atmosphère!*' (It is very unpleasant to speak in this environment!). In other words, Maurice Deixonne was very much isolated and environmental considerations did not interest the congress members in the least.

However, from 1970, a very clear change began to appear. New words (environment and quality of life) appeared in the speeches and motions, and new ways of thinking regarding growth were voiced, as, for example, in a resolution proposed by Philippe Garel:

L'homme, par la puissance considérable de son action, détruit anarchiquement cet équilibre [de la nature], et les ressources naturelles : des espèces naturelles disparaissent, des sources se tarissent, des sols sont détruits, des océans et des rivières se polluent, de vastes territoires livrés à une culture destructrice s'érodent, transformant en déserts des régions à potentiel agricole élevé. L'atmosphère de nos villes s'empoisonne de fumées et de gaz toxiques. Les déboisements incontrôlés ne permettent plus de régénérer l'air. Les bruits de nos villes concentrationnaires sont des atteintes à notre santé. Les pesticides, les insecticides, les engrais se concentrant le long des chaînes alimentaires, l'homme est en fin de cette chaîne. La radioactivité croît ces dernières années de façon sensible, au point de menacer les structures de l'être. La recherche effrénée de la croissance pour le profit aggrave jour après jour le déséquilibre biologique. (Man, by the considerable power of his actions, is recklessly destroying this balance [of nature], and the natural resources: natural species are disappearing, sources are drying up, the ground is being destroyed, oceans and rivers are being polluted, vast territories are being eroded, victims of a destructive culture, and regions with a high agricultural potential are being transformed into deserts. The atmosphere of our cities is being poisoned by toxic smoke and gas. Uncontrolled deforestation makes it impossible to regenerate the air. The noise of our highly concentrated cities is damaging our health. Pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers are concentrated along the food chain. Man is at the end of this chain. Radioactivity has increased to such an extent in recent years that the structures of our very being are threatened. Day by day, the frantic quest for growth, for profit worsens this biological imbalance).

It is clearly not possible to present every detail of these congress debates, but a provisional double conclusion appears to present itself. The division within the *Parti socialiste* did indeed occur in 1970 through the incorporation of this clearly environmental resolution. But, and this is my second conclusion, it was a process, a very marginal one, which originated at the top, which was not integrated by the party leadership as a central pillar of its argumentation and which was not adopted by the party as a whole. Nonetheless, the division of 1970 was real and, from that point on, environmental concerns began to appear at the congresses. Furthermore, the *PS* programme adopted in early 1972 had an ecological undertone rare for the time, with two specific chapters '*le droit à la ville et à la nature*' (the right to towns and nature) and '*la sauvegarde de l'environnement*' (saving the environment). In the following years, these considerations spread through the entire *Parti* and became anchored, mainly due to vertical top-down pressure. It would appear that the party leadership, or those of the leadership who managed to get approval, was intellectually convinced that it was necessary to use this theme of the environment more and more. Naturally, it is impossible to know whether they did so out of a deep conviction or following tactical considerations, seeing in the environment both an argument with which to critique the system and to seduce part of the new electoral territory that was being born.

To explain this differentiation between pioneers, followers and opponents, I believe that three elements of explanation apply.

The Three Elements of Explanation

Modernity

The first element is that of modernity, taken to signify the desire to establish a radically and deliberately new political project. Some parties like to consider themselves as modern, mindful of the new desires of the youth, while others are ontologically wary of new ways of thinking, suspecting anti-worker distraction. There is a large gap between preparing the left of the twenty-first century, on the one hand, and returning to Lenin, on the other, and between seducing the youth and the middle classes on the one hand, or seeking refuge in a mythical working class, on the other. It is a difference which is often hidden but which the environmental issue tends to reveal.

The *PSU* has always liked to believe itself open to change and its pioneering nature is thus not surprising. Inversely, all the other groups have been preoccupied with looking backwards while, at the same time, they have been wary of overstepping the line. They have looked backwards to remain faithful to their forefathers, all the while mindful of the ever-present threat of petty bourgeois acceptance by the small remaining pure minority. They are obsessed with betrayal. The *PSU* has no such obsession, as, for them, moving forward towards the revolution means releasing itself from its social-democratic matrix of the past, rather than reactivating it, or freezing it.

This relationship with modernity highlights much of the major difference between the *Parti communiste* and the *Parti socialiste*. Both undertook the modernization of their party. But they were doing so at extremely different speeds and to vastly different

depths. The *PS* was seeking new middle classes, and, to seduce them, was using every means necessary, attempting to both modernize its language and areas of action, while gripping on to a highly Marxist political culture and highly revolutionary rhetoric. Until 1981, they accomplished this feat to perfection. Inversely, the *PCF* still wavered between letting loose its federation in Paris, which mainly addressed the middle classes, or seeking refuge in the apparent comfort of its favourite, the working class, and its impregnable socialist base.

It was this very relationship with modernity that caused the rapid mutation of the spontaneist Maoists of *Tout* and *La Cause du peuple*. But their almost immediate dissolution, as soon as they discovered the urgency of the environmental issue and other cultural demands that did not conform to their initial theoretical world vision, is indicative of the oxymoron that was modern Marxism-Leninism in France of the 1970s.

This relationship with modernity also highlights the division between the *OCI*, on the one hand, and the *Ligue communiste* and the *AMR* on the other. The *Ligue* really did want to avoid sectarian isolationism and open up to the new aspirations of the young population, even if its political culture caused it to continually seek refuge in procrastination and scorn, an attitude at its most extreme among those who claimed to be guardians of Trotskyist truth, the Lambertists of the *OCI*.

Marxism

The second element of interpretation is the relationship with Marxism. The more a group identifies itself as Marxist, and the more important the place it gives to the working class, the more difficulty it has absorbing the issue of the environment. It is true that, in the case of the *PSU* or spontaneist Maoists, this relationship with Marxism is partly related to the issue of modernity, but not in the case of the anarchists, on the contrary. In the case of the latter, the desire to modernise the old *Fédération anarchiste* led most of these young anarchists of the post-1968 period to succumb to the allure of Marxism and workerism, even if this implied neglecting the environmental cause, viewed as petty bourgeois.

Indeed, at the heart of the allergy of communism and para-communism to the environmental cause is the Marxist heritage which, in this area, was carefully preserved by Lenin and his successors.

Certainly, Marx's thought is sufficiently complex – and mutable – to allow several interpretations. However, the effort of some thinkers to make the German philosopher the ancestor of a hypothetical eco-socialism does not seem very convincing.⁷⁸ Not only because Marx's few ambiguous sentences denouncing the capitalist exploitation over nature were entirely ignored by the 1968 Marxists, but also because the dominant attitude of Marxian thought is certainly not an eco-socialist approach.⁷⁹ In reality,

⁷⁸ Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature* (New York 1999); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York 2000); John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (Leiden 2016).

⁷⁹ For a good summary of this discussion, see Serge Audier, *L'Age productiviste. Hégémonie prométhéenne, brèches et alternatives écologiques* (Paris 2019), 147–213.

Marx's approach to what he did not call the ecological question can be summarized in three elements, indeed three elements regularly reiterated by his revolutionary admirers.

Marx's 'approach' to the environmental cause can be summarized in three main parts:

1. The starting point must be his famous declaration in his critique of the Gotha programme, in which he imagined the future of communism, describing it as follows:

after the productive forces have also increased, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of the bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!⁸⁰

Thus, happiness would come from the maximum intensification of productivity. This is the origin of the well-known productivism of communists, their fascination with technology, be it the supersonic Concorde or nuclear power stations, and their blindness to the environmental damage caused by their comrades in socialist countries.

2. This productivist vision of Marx's is accentuated by a second element, which can be summarized in another famous text by Marx: 'A social formation never disappears before all productive forces for which it is broad enough are developed'.⁸¹ With such thinking, it is clear that preventing any economic growth or even questioning the concept of economic progress can only be viewed as a barrier to the growth of productive forces. Thus, adopting a counter-revolutionary attitude would only delay the change of socio-economic system.
3. The third major element of Marxist thought is his total optimism, as summarized by an extract from the same text of 1859: 'Humanity only sets itself problems that it is capable of solving'.⁸²

Optimism

This final aspect is related to the third element above, namely revolutionary optimism, an essential element to understanding the different approaches within neo-Leninist organizations. The Trotskyists are generally optimistic, but the communists, and especially the Maoists, are so to an extreme. We will now examine the most important texts of these political traditions.

From the communist point of view, Leninist thought is the guiding light. In the area which today is known as environmentalism, Lenin embraced Marxist tradition, updating it with an original analysis of the technology of production as an element of man's hold over nature. Lenin commented on the innovations proposed by Taylorism in the scientific

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, *Critique du programme de Gotha* (1875) (Beijing 1972), 16.

⁸¹ Id., *Contribution à la critique de l'économie politique* (1859) (Paris 1972), 5.

⁸² Ibid.

organization of work. His first comment regarding Taylorism was highly critical, as demonstrated by the title of the article he published in *Pravda* in March 1913: 'A 'scientific' system to pressurise the worker'.⁸³ But, a year later, in the same publication, Lenin's conclusion was not the same when considering Taylorism in a socialist system, rather than a capitalist one:

Unbeknownst to its creators and against their wishes, the Taylor system prepares for the time when the proletariat will take control of all social production and will nominate its own commissions, workers commissions with responsibility for correctly distributing and regulating all social work. The great productions, machines, railways, the telephone, all these offer many possibilities to reduce by four times the working time of organized workers, while offering them four times more well-being than at present.⁸⁴

Lenin's point of view on the scientific organization of work is always optimistic because he is technically minded and uncritical. The very concept of 'the damage of progress' is completely alien to his way of thinking.

Trotskyists do not share this view. Their reference document remains the transition programme, a text written by Trotsky in 1938. However, this text is inherently ambivalent, characterized both by optimism, sometimes forced, on the urgency of the socialist revolution, and underlying pessimism, inspiring fear for humanity itself;⁸⁵ hence the classic summary of this text as 'socialism or barbarianism'. For Trotskyists of the 1930s to the 1950s, the concrete form of barbarianism was war, world war, then nuclear war. For their successors of the 1970s, an environmental catastrophe could be the new dreaded form of barbarianism.⁸⁶

However, Maoists texts always excluded any pessimistic alternative to the victory of socialism, including the appearance of nuclear arms, which did not constitute a difference in kind. The Maoists calmly considered the prospect of nuclear war: 'If [the warmongering Americans] do not provoke war, they will last a little longer on Earth. But the sooner they start the war, the sooner they will be eliminated from our planet'.⁸⁷ It is thus hardly surprising that they did not panic before some radioactive waste.

Following this study, the main conclusion which can be drawn is this: the meeting between the left and environmentalism was a late (post-1968) and difficult one, as Serge Audier rightly points out: 'Ecology was notoriously not a subject of debate in May '68. It was not until after 1968, and especially in the 1970s, that a real ecological dynamic was gradually set in motion'.⁸⁸ In fact, instead of leaders of the left, there

⁸³ Lenin, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 18 (Paris-Moscou 1977), 618.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 20 (1976), 158.

⁸⁵ L. Trotsky, *L'agonie du capitalisme et les tâches de la IVe Internationale* (1938) (Paris 1973).

⁸⁶ Samuel Holder, 'Socialisme ou barbarie: comment se pose la question en ce début de XXIe siècle?', *Carré Rouge* 27, Oct. 2003.

⁸⁷ Mao Zedong, 'Le peuple chinois ne se laisse pas intimider par la bombe atomique' (28 janvier 1955), *Œuvres choisies*, vol. 5 (Beijing 1977), 163.

⁸⁸ S. Audier, *op. cit.*, 544.

were three main groups of pioneers. The first were certain international intellectuals, experts and politicians (Meadows' report of 1970, Mansholt's report of 1972). The second were certain politicians of the right, notably those responsible for the government decision in January 1971 to create a secretary of state responsible for the protection of nature and the environment, a fundamental step in France, entrusted to Robert Poujade. The third group was the independent environmentalist movement, which gradually emerged in France from 1972.⁸⁹

These three stimuli received a popular reaction in public opinion and the organizations on the left reacted by gradually modifying their traditional approach, for reasons of substance, being convinced of the environmental emergency, or of conjuncture, to increase their influence.

Above all, the broad reluctance of the French left to adopt environmental arguments can be explained by the power of Marxist tradition in France. This objectively anti-environmental stance was favoured by the Marxist revival of the period in and around 1968. For most left-wing French activists, deeply embedded in the Marxist tradition, environmentalism committed four cardinal sins. Firstly, economically, it did not stop at the concept of added value defined in *Das Kapital*, but introduced economic concepts from outside Marxist theory, viewed as a kind of negative progress. Secondly, socially, it represented a cause borne by the bourgeoisie, rather than the workers, who wanted to adopt consumerism and not reject it. Thirdly, politically, it was a cause of such an urgent nature that it demanded immediate victories, rather than accepting the present while waiting for the salvation of the revolution. Finally, ideologically, it was haunted by despair rather than optimism, as highlighted by the subheading of *La Gueule ouverte*, 'Le journal qui annonce la fin du monde' (The paper which announces the end of the world).

It thus appears difficult to accept the opinion, already quoted, of the political scientist Jean-Luc Parodi that leftism is the natural father of environmentalism. In fact, this contradiction between his conclusion and mine simply indicates that leftism cannot of course be reduced to the official left or, above all, to the extreme left.

Cultural Leftism, Political Leftism and the French Left

To understand this contradiction, I will start from a single, small event. During the congress of the *Parti socialiste* in 1971, a delegate took the floor: 'The Mollet-Savary motion speaks of leftists, but with a paternalist undertone. Firstly, there are leftists and leftists. Secondly, there is much talk today about transport, housing, quality of life and the leftists had something to do with this'. The transcript of the congress records that applause broke out then. But, in 1971, no far-left organization had truly rallied to the cause of the

⁸⁹ Cécile Blatrix and Laurent Gervereau, eds, *Tout vert! Le grand tournant de l'écologie, 1969–1975* (Paris 2016). For the first political ecology movements, see the major works of Alexis Vrignon: 'L'invention politique de l'environnement', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 113 (2012), 179–90 and, especially, *La naissance de l'écologie politique en France: une nébuleuse au cœur des années 68* (Rennes 2017). To be completed, for the following period, by Sébastien Repaire, 'La nature contre l'Etat? Construction et structuration de l'écologie politique en France de la fin des années 1970 au début des années 1990' (PhD thesis IEP-Paris, 2019).

environment. Similarly, military security reports attributed environmental thinking to the leftists. In its June 1973 bulletin, the reporter noted in a chronological retrospective: 'Tuesday 5th. International Day of the Environment (the subject of environmental protection was put forward by the left)'.⁹⁰

Two elements explain this contradiction. The first is that the language of the existential revolt of French youth at the time was left-wing rhetoric. Far from the theoretical quibbling of the supporters, most young people put together their own references, their own arguments to support a few ideas that were both vague and strong (change life, support freedom, ensure equality), all in a mixed anarchist-Marxist language. This cultural leftism, whether it stemmed from the waves of striking secondary school students, the readers of *Charlie-Hebdo* or of the first *Actuel*, or the succession of former anarchists, neo-Leninists or PSU supporters (such as the founder of Friends of the Earth in 1970, Brice Lalonde),⁹¹ was the source of the adoption by French society of these alternative demands, among which the issue of the environment was growing in increasing importance. The earliest environmental committees, in Grenoble, Angers and elsewhere, are led and occupied by former far-left supporters, weary of internal quarrelling and the high expectations placed on the future revolution.⁹²

Secondly, the French far left of the period in and around 1968 was not a sect but reflected the political-cultural position of much of the youth who, as a whole, adopted many of its multiple causes. These concerns grew in individual activists, concerns which, by social capillarity, then spread through the revolutionary organizations. Thus, the political left opened up to these heterodox environmental causes, with more or less ease, speed and depth depending on political convictions.

Leftism is a truly perfect example of the statement by Raymond Aron who paraphrases Marx, '*Les hommes font l'histoire, mais ils ne savent pas l'histoire qu'ils font*' (Men make history, but they do not know the history they are making). At the roots of leftist ideology lies an intangible principle: no important partial victory is possible until the destruction of the cause of evil (capitalism) has been complete. Leftism actually achieved the exact opposite. Thanks to capitalism, through criticizing it, modifying it, improving it, it profoundly changed social relations within contemporary France. But this victory was unexpected, reaped by the cultural left, generally against the wishes of the political left. Needless to say, if, in 1965, a modern-day Pythia had told the anarchists, Trotskyists and Maoists, who were beginning to find their voices, that they would soon triumph through feminism, homosexual-heterosexual equality and environmentalism, none of them would have believed her. More importantly, few would have wanted to.

⁹⁰ Monthly Report of the *Direction de la Sécurité militaire*, June 1973. Archives Service historique de la Défense (Vincennes), 2 S 28.

⁹¹ J.-P. Deléage, op. cit., 148.

⁹² Pour Grenoble, see J. Sibille, op. cit.; for the *Amis de la Terre*, see A. Vrignon, 'L'invention politique de l'environnement', op. cit., 186.

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