

# Ecology: A class struggle

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**Ecological politics have struggled to ward off environmental disaster. To impose itself as a transformative force, Jean-Baptiste Comby shows that ecological politics must become the strategic tool and compass of a genuine class struggle.**

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Reviewed: Jean-Baptiste Comby, *Ecolos, mais pas trop... Les classes sociales face à l'enjeu environnemental* (Ecological but not too much ... Social classes and environmentalism), Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 2024, 192 p., 14 €.

For France, 2018 was a year marked by a rapid acceleration of ecology's political history. It witnessed the cancellation of the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, climate demonstrations, the *Affaire du siècle* ("Deal of the Century"),<sup>1</sup> and the beginning of the Yellow Vest movement. Since then, ecological collectives and organizations have diversified, forms of action have become more radical, and alliances have been forged with decolonial, feminist, and labor struggles, as seen in Sainte-Soline, Verdragon, and Grandpuits.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, ecological collapse (drought, megafires, floods, and so on) has intensified throughout the world, in ways that particularly impact the working classes, racialized groups, and women. The tension between ecological politics'

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: *L'Affaire du siècle* was a campaign organized in 2018 by four French organizations (Oxfam France, Greenpeace France, Notre affaire à tous, and Fondation pour la nature et l'homme) who sued the French government for its inadequate response to climate change. An online petition related to the campaign received over two million signatures.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: In 2023, thousands of protestors fought the creation of a "mega basin" water reservoir at Sainte-Soline. In 2021, Verdragon, a pioneering center for working-class ecology, was founded in the Paris suburb of Bagnolet. Grandpuits is a French oil refinery that is being converted into a zero-crude platform.

growing strength and increasing environmental suffering raises, for the sociologist Jean-Baptiste Comby, a strategic question: "can the pressing environmental situation give rise to a coalition that could prevent the impending disaster?" (p. 17).

Having posed this question, Comby seeks to provide a methodical and persuasive answer. First, he notes that "ecological politics," whether it is reformist (as with public environmental action and green capitalism) or non-capitalist (that is, socially marginal alternatives), rests on the same philosophy of the individual subject, while "disregarding the social world's tendency to reproduce itself" (p. 18). Consequently, domination based on race, class, and gender, on the one hand, and non-ecological attitudes and practices, on the other, do not encounter structural challenges. Based on this conclusion, Comby proposes turning ecology into a transformative force, which does not aspire to raise ecological consciousness, but to "modify the structure of the social relations that shape (*non*) ecological consciousness" (p. 20). Practically speaking, his goal is to "dismantle the capitalist matrix of social relations" (p. 20) that, in schools and in the workplace, socialize people into dispositions that are incompatible with an ecologically "sober" society: the cult of individual success, competitive attitudes, and capital accumulation. Finally, the author of *La question climatique* (The climate question, 2015) considers strategies that could give rise to majority support for a transformative and revolutionary ecology. He argues, in short, that a class struggle must be waged "that uses ecology as its lever and its compass" (p. 29). Specifically, he calls for alliances between very fragmented working classes and the cultural petty bourgeoisie around a slogan that must become its political goal: the unequal ecological condition of social classes, that is, "the unequal distribution of costs and profits associated with the environmental condition" (p. 23).

## Critiquing dominant ecology and its middlemen

Such is the book's general thesis. As for the particulars, this concise and readable book consists of four chapters. The first defines the contours of "dominant ecology and its middlemen." The next three describe the relationship between seven class factions of the (petty) bourgeoisie and the working classes as they relate to environmental issues. Building on a collective momentum<sup>3</sup> that has been underway for several years-

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<sup>3</sup> See, notably, Franck Poupeau, Johanna Siméant, Gaëlle Ronsin, Séverine Misset, Nicolas Renahy, et al., *Proceedings des journées d'étude "Écologie et classes sociales."* *Écologie et classes sociales*, 2024.

-analyzing environmentalism from the standpoint of a sociology inspired by Pierre Bourdieu--Comby shows how "ecological policies soften the boundaries between factions of the dominant class, but heighten the boundaries that traverse the working classes" (p. 24). By the same token, Comby opposes a common ecological front, which would minimize class antagonisms,<sup>4</sup> and prevailing ecology, which depends on commercial methods, techno-solutionism, eco-citizenship, and the neutralization of alternatives.

On the latter point, Comby goes even further: the reappropriation of the ecological critique of capitalism is tied not only to cynical strategies, but also to the role of those he calls the "courtiers" (p. 40). By promoting festivals, training programs, movies, and think tanks (like *Fresque du climat*, *Agir pour le vivant*, and the Shift Project), these well-intentioned individuals seek to create new ways of thinking. In fact, they mainly help forge connections between the actors of reformist ecology (experts, consultants, and decision-makers) and non-capitalist ecology. Because they are concerned with "balance,"<sup>5</sup> that is, the quest for an equilibrium between opposed forces" (p. 41), courtiers contribute to the "pillaging" (p. 40) of non-capitalist alternatives by prevailing ecology in a diffuse and largely uncriticized manner. Drawing on his observations of mobilization of milieus close to the corporate world during the 2015 Paris COP21, Comby analyzes the trajectories of the event's organizers. Often born into middle classes, they undergo upward mobility (through education or work) without quite making it to the economic and cultural elite, "which amounts to an ambivalent experience of socialization" (p. 43). During their studies or following a bifurcation that they interpret in psychological (but not political) terms, these courtiers are inclined to "distance themselves from capitalism without abandoning it, to cooperate with critical ecologists without legitimizing them" (p. 41). As a result, certain "weighted" non-capitalist alternatives are reappropriated by the state or corporations: "thoughts of the living," eco-citizenship, permaculture, organic produce, yoga, and so on.

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<sup>4</sup> Comby is notably critical of Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schulz's *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique. Comment faire émerger une classe écologique consciente et fière d'elle-même*, La Découverte, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Baptiste Comby, "Un éthos pondérateur. Adoucir et filtrer la critique écologique, l'ouvrir au capitalisme. Et vice versa," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 241, 2022, p. 74-91

## Politicizing the cultural petty bourgeoisie

Of course, the courtiers' trajectories merely bolster "prevailing ecology." Yet Comby adds that this ecology aligns itself with "social dispositions particular to the [economic and cultural] bourgeoisie" (p. 68), notably its taste for balance. In this way, the cultural factions of the bourgeoisie (including knowledge professions and mid-level public servants) seek a balance between comfort and the rejection of consumerism, whereas the bourgeoisie's economic factions (corporate managers and salespersons) embrace consumerism without reservation. Consequently, rather than emphasizing the existing tensions between these two class factions--since ecology "values a form of moderation that is more adjusted to cultural distinction than economic success" (p. 68)--Comby emphasizes the "moral proximity" that makes possible convergent interests at the high end of the social stratum. He reminds us that the diversity of bourgeois lifestyles should not obscure the similar way in which they exercise their dominance--namely, by "blending material comfort with moral concerns" (p. 74). This explains the rise of a bourgeois ecology that, as it promotes sustainable technology, electric cars, organic food, and ecotourism, has had any trace of conflict squeezed out of it.

It is in the middling spheres of the social stratum that ecology becomes a status marker, "an issue for public debate on which one takes a stance to validate one's lifestyle, affirm one's place in society, and defend one's social identity" (p. 93). Comby identifies three subcategories. First, a majority group belonging to the "new petty bourgeoisie" in the cultural realm (the civil service and teaching profession) and the economic realm (CEOs and managers) embraces reformist environmentalism, thus taking its cues from the bourgeoisie. Second, an economic hub that is far removed from the latter (including artisans and small businesspeople) opposes the policies of prevailing ecology that threaten their lifestyle (hunting, driving, meat-eating, and so on). Finally, the left-leaning cultural hub (professionals with high levels of cultural capital and the highly educated poor) trends towards deliberate degrowth (less time at work, *reconversion*, and autoproduction), which they believe should be generalized. Comby's political goal is to expand the outlook of the latter hub to the entire cultural petty bourgeoisie so as to "turn them away from dominant forms of integration and social recognition--to send them back to school, to paraphrase Bernard Friot, forcing them to pay attention to the working classes" (p. 27).

## Transformative ecology from a working-class perspective

Though the relationship between ecology and the (petty) bourgeoisie is far from homogeneous, it must still be admitted that they participate in a "constructing ecology" (p. 119) that leaves the working classes out of the picture. Comby's previous work<sup>6</sup> is a critique of "ecological dispossession"--that is, the distancing, the moralization, and even the domestication of working classes by exclusive ecological policies. This concern is developed in his new book through an attempt to characterize popular conceptions of ecology. Revisiting insights first proposed by Hadrien Malier,<sup>7</sup> Comby shows that the dominated factions of the social stratum are not opposed to ecological ideas and practices, but that they "embrace the inertia of lifestyles that are already economical" (p. 123). Insufficient time, unpredictability, and limited budgets result in underappreciated subsistence practices. Two longstanding characteristics of working classes<sup>8</sup> characterize this ecology. The first is a form of popular realism, a "taste for the concrete, respectability, and a rejection of idealism" (p. 136), which can be seen, for instance, in autoproduction. Second, they are aware that they are not responsible for major polluters (companies, the state, and the bourgeoisie). In this way, the working classes' relationship to environmental concerns is reinscribed into material constraints and social subordination.

Despite these working-class ideas about ecology notwithstanding--which could constitute the "ferment of class consciousness" (p. 136)--environmental policies have strengthened the "fragmentation dynamics that afflict this social group for nearly forty years" (p. 120). In keeping with his previous work,<sup>9</sup> Comby shows that increased competition at the lower end of the social spectrum. For instance, the stable cultural factions (government employees, personal services) endorse the eco-citizenship of the poor, which characterizes "financial discipline, moderate consumption, and 'getting by'" (p. 131) as distinct ecological practices. The stable economic sector (skilled workers and office personnel) prioritizes comfort, aesthetics, and money over ecological concerns out of realism, as it seeks to "consume 'like everyone else'" (p. 134). Finally,

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Baptiste Comby, *La Question climatique. Genèse et dépolitisation d'un problème public*, Raisons d'agir, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Baptiste Comby and Hadrien Malier, "Les classes populaires et l'enjeu écologique. Un rapport réaliste travaillé par des dynamiques statutaires diverses," *Sociétés contemporaines*, 124, 2021, p. 37-66.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hoggart, *La Culture du pauvre. Etude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre*, Minuit, 1970.

<sup>9</sup> See Joseph Cacciari, "L'impératif de 'transition énergétique' comme double peine pour un territoire de la production énergétique soumis à la reconversion," *VertigO*, 3, 2014.

for the most precarious factions (unskilled workers, social welfare recipients, temp workers), ecology is primarily seen as "moral regulation" (p. 129), which consists, for example, in denouncing deviant behavior, educating children how to behave at home or in the neighborhood. Among these three strata, ecology becomes unquestionably a marker of status.

## **Conclusion: towards a revolutionary ecology?**

Ultimately, one can only applaud Comby's call for the abolition of structures that induce competitive social relations at the low end of the social spectrum. This competition, heightened by environmental policies, prevents the advent of a majority that is prepared to fight socio-ecological inequality. Drawing on numerous interviews, Comby presents in elegant detail a possible catalyst for class consciousness: the unequal ecological condition of social classes.

Two points merit being raised. First, engagement with other intellectual traditions connecting environmental concerns and social issues would in no way detract from the innovative character of Comby's book. Indeed, fruitful opportunities for discussion exist--that are rarely or never taken advantage of--between Bourdieu-inspired sociology and "ecological Marxism," research inspired by the "degrowth" movement, eco-socialism, decolonial ecology, ecofeminism, and older perspectives, such as those of Murray Bookchin and André Gorz. Furthermore, and despite the book's focus on obstacles to an ecological reorientation of society, greater precision concerning the type of "ecological" society that one should desire (including the state's role, postgrowth, and forms of collective organization) and revolutionary strategies that must be adopted (occupations, strikes, sabotage, boycotts, insurrections, relationships with partisan politics, and so on) would make it possible to prevent this political program from being an empty promise. This is particularly important at a time when the ideological and political balance of power is starting to favor neofascism in general and reactionary ecologies in particular.

The fact remains that Comby's proposal, which consists in prioritizing ecological struggles relating to the deconstruction of social forces that fragment the working class and depoliticize the cultural petty bourgeoisie, is enough to inspire enthusiasm. This transformative ecology can thus assume new forms, focusing on social inequality: access to real estate, in the case of marginalized and racialized

groups; sharing wealth and power at work; defending schools that socialize children into cooperation and autoproduction; and regular rather than project-based funding for universities and not-for-profit organizations. These struggles, which also entail alliances with decolonial, feminist, and labor movements, could well be the catalyst for a revolutionary ecology.

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