



Interview with Yann Le Lann and Sabrina Zajak

»Fight Every Crisis«?

The Climate Movement in Crisis Mode

Just prior to the pandemic, how were the climate movements in France and Germany shaping up? How were they structured sociologically?

Yann Le Lann There is a growing awareness in France of the catastrophic influence of human activities on the environment. It is now clear to a significant majority of the population that global warming is a reality. On the other hand, there are still wide differences regarding the importance of the issue and what responses are needed. There is a tendency, particularly when we consider the current levels of polarization in civil society, to overestimate the differences and opposition between the blue-collar and white-collar workers, as well as between generations. Sensitivity to the climate issue is certainly not only a concern for the youngest generations; all age groups appear to be quite similarly concerned with the situation, except for those over 65 years of age for whom it is less present. There is also a very marked awareness of the issue within the working classes, perhaps contrary to existing stereotypes. But in France, any generational and social divisions are secondary to the left-right political divide. Those who see themselves as ideologically leftist see the climate issue as being of crucial importance, whereas this is much less the case on the right. Mobilization over climate change, therefore, remains highly influenced by existing forms of political socialization.

Sabrina Zajak I think that this analysis also broadly applies to the German experience. In surveys conducted during demonstrations in Germany, we found that a majority of demonstrators were female high school students with parents that are left-wing and university graduates. The rapid mobilization and spread of climate

movements such as Fridays for Future came as a surprise to many. But in reality, the environmental and climate movement has a strong tradition in Europe. In Germany, we have long had movements against both nuclear energy and fossil fuel mining, with groups such as Ende Gelände, working towards further protections for the environment. The climate issue was also widely addressed in the media, such as with the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord. Consequently, under the banner of Fridays for Future, students took to the streets to openly raise the issues of climate protection. This was quite surprising at the time, as they initially mobilized over other issues such as education. Within a few months, though, the movement had spread widely and further groups such as Parents for Future, Scientists for Future and Extinction Rebellion were born.

The Covid-19 pandemic - and the social distancing measures taken to contain it - brought public gatherings to a sudden halt. How have the climate change movements reacted to this?

Sabrina Zajak The pandemic has halted nearly all social interactions and, of course, demonstrations have been severely restricted. Movements have responded to these challenges in different ways: some, including migrant advocacy groups, have taken legal action to claim the right of assembly and organize small demonstrations that have respected social distancing guidelines. Fridays for Future was able to build upon an already highly developed digital infrastructure, which it had established through networking across Germany and Europe. They organized alternative educational forums, addressed the effects of the pandemic on their

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movement through the hashtag #WirBildenZukunft (We Shape the Future) and updated their demands accordingly. They also moved into hybrid forms of protest, which combine both online and offline activity. For example, they attracted a lot of attention from their protest in front of the Bundestag in April 2020, symbolically signaling the scale of their movement with more than 10,000 banners while simultaneously organizing an online strike. Starting in summer 2020, Fridays for Future joined forces with various other anti-racist and pro-migrant movements such as Black Lives Matter and Unteilbar and organized their own large in-person demonstrations, although again socially distanced. This was particularly important in order to distance themselves from the growing number of anti-lockdown protests.

Yann Le Lann In France, mass demonstrations by climate protestors began several months earlier than in Germany. They also stopped earlier than the German protests. After the September 2019 clashes between protestors and the police, there have been no further mass demonstrations. There were a few rallies during the pandemic, but they were legally questionable, as well as being held in the context of a general reluctance to organize such events due to Covid-19. We saw the impetus for mass demonstrations moving towards other demands, which nonetheless retained links to the climate movement. The protests which reappeared after the lockdown were, like in Germany, primarily directed towards police violence and linked with Black Lives Matter.

Do you see any reconfiguring of the climate movements' demands in view of the socio-economic consequences of Covid-19? What strategies are they developing in order to effectively mobilize in this new context?

Sabrina Zajak To accelerate the socio-economic shifts they were looking for, the climate movement cooperated with the trade unions under the slogan »Fight Every Crisis,« working together to integrate causes such as social injustice and pandemic aid distribution with the issue of climate protection. They reiterated that the pandemic was only increasing social inequality and marginalization, and that urgent political actions were

needed to deal with this. Even before the pandemic emerged, the Fridays for Future movement was making demands aimed at international, national and local bodies to increase and improve their climate protection policies. At the same time, they also appealed to individuals directly by urging people to radically change their lifestyles and consumption patterns. In this respect, the coronavirus pandemic has opened up new possibilities both for the movement as well as society as a whole. Alternative consumption patterns have suddenly become the norm for many people, an example being spending holidays at home rather than flying abroad. At the same time, by holding this lifestyle discourse, the movement lends itself to criticism as the costs involved are less of a concern to higher income groups and non-migrants than for those already marginalized by society. Taking this into account, the climate movement must continue to consider social justice and economic development goals in conjunction with their environmental aims in order to avoid potential conflicts with other protest groups.

Yann Le Lann Those who took to the French streets from autumn 2018 onwards, particularly during the Gilets Jaunes movement, stressed the fact that it is only through greater public involvement and mobilization that widespread ecological policy changes will be made possible. Since those who attended those events often belonged to political cultures with strong left-wing roots, the majority of them felt that the transition must be based on collective decision-making with the State being involved in an organizational role. For this reason, they generally do not include changes to personal consumption patterns within their key demands, even though they certainly approve of climate-friendly consumption strategies. I don't think the pandemic has changed that. What is true is that some environmental activists used this experience to show that a reduction in air travel, which they viewed as an often unnecessary and highly polluting form of consumption, was certainly possible. During these times, there remains a real risk that ecological concerns will be regarded as competing with social concerns and could therefore lose momentum and support. This is despite the work of activists in France and Germany in organizing responses that address ecological and social concerns together. The tensions between ecological and

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social issues were, in fact, at the heart of the Gilets Jaunes crisis. The climate movement and the Gilets Jaunes have profoundly influenced each other, with their respective aims beginning to evolve towards common goals. This explains the invention of the slogan «End of the World, End of the Month, Same Fight.» The climate movement has integrated social justice goals with its own demands, and the Gilets Jaunes movement has incorporated some environmental concerns into its platform.

With the Green Deal, the European Commission is proposing a major public intervention to make Europe a carbon-neutral continent. Is this approach beginning to convince the climate movement?

Yann Le Lann At the heart of the French climate movement are activists who are very much influenced by the American Green New Deal. This has led to the European Commission's Green Deal being criticized as a pale imitation of the American plan that does not draw the necessary lessons from the failures of major international discussions such as the Rio Summit and the Paris Agreement. Many within the climate movement see the European Green Deal as simply a means of prolonging the idea of sustainable development, which seeks to reconcile economic accumulation with ecological responsibility. Climate activists generally consider the economic model proposed by the European Commission to still be too focused on consumerism and increasing business opportunities. Lastly, activists often point to the weaknesses of domestic regulation and the perpetuation of a form of monetary bureaucracy, which they see as preventing the necessary democratic decisions being made regarding a new model for society. There are certainly lively internal debates within the climate movement, but the overall consensus is that the Green Deal does not go far enough and that it merely reproduces what they see as failed strategic approaches of the past.

Sabrina Zajak The Fridays for Future movement and other German climate action groups are well integrated into transnational networks, in addition to their strong grassroots activism. With the advent of Germany's EU Council Presidency, and in view of the difficulties many Eastern Member States have faced in the implementation of ambitious climate targets, activists were expecting a stronger commitment from the German government. They have expressed their views on the European Commission's proposals, including the launch of a European Citizens' Initiative. Over 85,000 people have indicated their support for this initiative and their belief that the EU proposals do not go far enough. In particular, they call for an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and achieving the zero CO₂ objective by 2035, in addition to a carbon adjustment mechanism at the EU's borders and increasing climate change education. Based on a feasibility study published in October 2020 by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, they make concrete proposals for achieving their goal of carbon neutrality by 2035 across various sectors. They see further room for improvement in the energy sector through the development of onshore wind energy; in industry through the development of climate-neutral production facilities and the promotion of the circular economy; and in the construction industry through the growing importance of energy renovation. Additionally, climate movements are increasingly working to highlight the need and capacity for policy actions at both national and pan-European levels. They draw on the experiences of the coronavirus pandemic as an example of just how much room for maneuver the EU has when the political will exists. Indicating the level of importance that politicians give to these issues, representatives of the climate movements are regularly invited to meetings with politicians such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel or President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.

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The Series

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The Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue has been organized since 2010 in cooperation with the Institut Montaigne in Paris. In view of the numerous challenges Europe is facing, Germany and France must take on particular responsibility for the future of the EU and work on the development of joint strategies. The Genshagen Forum actively supports this process by fostering constructive dialogue and networking between young leaders from both countries. The participants come from the areas of politics and administration, business, science and media. They belong to the age group between 30 and 40 years and are personally invited on the basis of their expertise.

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