

THE ORIGINS OF GREEN PARTIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Symposium at the GHI, May 26, 2004. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Heinrich Böll Foundation of North America. Conveners: Frank Zelko (GHI) and Marc Berthold (Heinrich Böll Foundation).

Participants: Christoph Becker-Schaum (Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin), Bob Brown (Member of the Australian Parliament), Pekka Haavisto (United Nations Environment Program and former Environmental Minister of Finland), Howie Hawkins (Syracuse Greens), Hubert Kleinert (University of Wiesbaden), Christof Mauch (GHI), Sara Parkin (Forum for the Future), John Rensenbrink (Bowdoin College), Lorna Salzman (New York Green Party), Charlene Spretnak (Institute of Integral Studies), Brian Tokar (Institute for Social Ecology), Helmut Wiesenthal (Humboldt University, Berlin).

One of the more tangible political results of the environmental movement over the last thirty years has been the development of green parties throughout many parts of the world. To varying degrees, these parties have sought to transcend the political discourse of the conservative, liberal, and social democratic parties that have dominated western democracies since the Second World War. Indeed, while green parties still remain firmly grounded in ecological principles, most of them have developed agendas that extend well beyond the traditional boundaries of environmentalism, encompassing issues such as human rights, social justice, and international relations. In some instances, green parties have attained a significant degree of direct political power at various levels of government, while in a few cases—Germany being the best-known example—they have even become part of a coalition government. In countries where the political structures are less favorable, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, green parties have had to exert influence in a less direct fashion. Nonetheless, their actions have frequently helped to shape the debate about various political issues, as well as forcing the traditional parties to consider matters that they would perhaps prefer to ignore.

In order to examine the history of such parties and to evaluate their impact over the past three decades, the GHI and the Heinrich Böll Foundation organized a day-long symposium featuring prominent green party activists and analysts from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Australia.

Bob Brown, Australia's most prominent green activist and the leader of the Australian Greens, opened the proceedings, examining the origins

of the Australian Green Party and detailing his own role in the party's history. In 1972, the United Tasmania Party, arguably the world's first green party, was formed in an effort to oppose the construction of a dam at Lake Pedder. In 1983, Brown became the first green to be elected to an Australian state parliament, and Tasmania, in part due to its system of proportional representation, has remained a stronghold of green politics in Australia. Due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, greens struggled to replicate this success at the national level, and have only in recent years begun to emerge as a significant electoral force. Nonetheless, throughout the past two decades, the Australian Green Party has exerted considerable influence on the major parties, particularly Labor, and has become more appealing to younger voters disillusioned with the established parties.

While Australia may lay claim to having the earliest green party, it is the German Greens, *Die Grünen*, who have become the most famous. According to Christoph Becker-Schaum, *Die Grünen* evolved in the 1970s because of the simple fact that none of the other political parties were adequately concerned with issues of social and environmental justice. The story of their evolution, of course, is a more complex one involving issues such as the development of new social movements concerned with quality-of-life issues and the rapid construction of nuclear power plants throughout the Federal Republic. Hubert Kleinert described how the German Greens went from being a social movement to a party in the 1980s. Two key developments occurred in 1983. First, the Bundestag voted to allow nuclear missiles to be deployed on German soil. This event signaled the end of the growth of social movements in Germany and forced the Greens to abandon their puritanical commitment to grassroots democracy and to enter the arena of ordinary electoral politics. 1983 was also the year in which the Hessian Green Party formed a governing coalition with the Social Democrats, an event that triggered a hefty controversy within the party, the outcome of which was the formation of two factions or wings, the so-called *Realos* (who advocated political realism) and the *Fundis* (who adhered to fundamental principles). This dualism constituted a formative influence on the party until the early 1990s.

According to Kleinert, *Die Grünen* provide an example of the utmost success one could realistically expect from a social movement in a highly developed democracy. *Die Grünen* became an institution and thereby an integral part of a system that they had previously opposed. Helmut Wiesenthal, a leading researcher of the German Greens and a former member of the Green Party's National Executive Committee, argued that *Die Grünen* had a disproportionate degree of influence given their relatively meager electoral success. By receiving 5 to 10 percent of the vote, they

regularly held the balance of power, forcing other political parties to adopt green issues in order to secure their share of the electorate.

The American participants came from various factions within the U.S. green movement, many of which have had their differences in the past. In the early 1980s, Fritjof Capra, a New-Age physicist, and Charlene Spretnak, a spiritual eco-feminist, toured Germany in order to learn how *Die Grünen* were transforming German politics. The result was a book titled *Green Politics: The Global Promise*, published in 1984. Spretnak and Capra concluded that the United States was fertile ground for a similar political movement, and many who read their work agreed. The positive response prompted Spretnak to organize a gathering of activists, organizers, and theorists from across the country in order to discuss the formation of a U.S. equivalent of *Die Grünen*. The conference took place in St. Paul, Minnesota, in August 1984, and the result was the Committees of Correspondence, the forerunner to the Green Party. Spretnak argued that much of the energy and momentum of the U.S. Greens was dissipated by the fractious tendencies of various activists and by arguments about whether or not Greens should become active in the American electoral system or remain a grassroots, extraparliamentary movement. In Spretnak's opinion, the Green Party only began to offer an alternative to the mainstream parties when it moved away from the dogmatic Marxism and anarchism of some of its more radical members.

Howie Hawkins, a UPS truck unloader in Syracuse with a long history of involvement in green politics, came from one of the factions that Spretnak criticized. Hawkins, who has had a long-standing affiliation with Murray Bookchin's Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, argued that his group had been primarily interested in linking social and environmental issues and criticizing the Old Left and American liberals for their lack of commitment to ecological and social issues. For Hawkins, the U.S. Greens were a product of the New Left student movements of the 1960s, which explains why many rejected mainstream electoral politics in favor of grassroots activism. Brian Tokar, also a member of the Institute for Social Ecology, further emphasized the problems of becoming involved in traditional electoral politics. In response to Spretnak's criticism, Tokar argued that the social ecology eco-anarchist perspective he and Hawkins represented had filled a vital niche in the movement's history. Rather than attempting to hijack the movement, as some of their critics contended, social ecologists had provided an ideological and organizational focus for many activists who were searching for a form of politics outside the American mainstream and for an ideology that explained the link between environmental deterioration and social inequality.

Like Spretnak, Lorna Salzman, who co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and has written extensively on green politics, took issue

with Hawkins's view of green parties as an outgrowth of the New Left. The major defect in progressive movements in the United States, she argued, is the lack of grounding in an ecological paradigm and sensibility. The U.S. Green Party, contrary to public belief and expectations, has relegated environmental concerns and activism to the back burner, and has instead chosen to identify itself with more traditional sectarian leftist ideologies, broadly defined as racial and social justice. As a result, the party has refrained from addressing or confronting the numerous transnational treaties and institutions that affect the global environment, such as the Kyoto Treaty, biodiversity protocols, NAFTA, and the WTO. If the Green Party is to become a force to be reckoned with, Salzman contended, it must go beyond those it deems its "natural allies," and offer a broader critique than that purveyed by the New Left movement of the 1960s.

John Rensenbrink, an emeritus professor in political science at Bowdoin College and longstanding Green Party activist, offered an explanation for the diverging views represented by Hawkins and Tokar on the one hand, and Spretnak and Salzman on the other. In his analysis of the U.S. Green Party, Rensenbrink employed Max Weber's distinction between an "Ethics of Intention" and an "Ethics of Responsibility." People who hold to an Ethics of Intention, Weber argued, focus strongly on their ideals and principles and are reluctant to bend them, much less break them, to adapt to changing circumstances. For such people, compromise tends to be an epithet. People who pursue an Ethics of Responsibility, on the other hand, are more pragmatic. They devote greater effort to strategy, risk assessment, and readiness to adapt to circumstances. Although they also believe that vision and values must be kept clearly in mind, they are nonetheless prepared to compromise. Most green parties, Rensenbrink argued, have drawn people from both of these ethical positions, which has resulted in the conflicts and damaging disruptions discussed by Spretnak, Tokar, and Hawkins. In Germany, this struggle was best represented by the split between *Realos* and the *Fundis*. In the United States, the struggle between these two ethical tendencies was intense for the first fifteen years of the Green Party's history. Gradually, however, Greens found a kind of structure that, though seeming to favor the *Realos*, has also built in some key elements of the *Fundi* perspective.

In their presentations, Pekka Haavisto and Sara Parkin discussed the rise of green parties in their countries—Finland and the United Kingdom respectively—and examined how Greens have come to play a role on the international stage. Parkin, a leading member of the U.K. Greens throughout the 1980s, pointed out that the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post electoral system meant that the Green Party had not been distracted by thoughts of imminent power. Instead, Greens expended their intellectual energy on long, detailed manifestos and policy documents. Parkin de-

scribed how she had fought, and ultimately lost, a battle for a new type of organization with a revised political strategy, one more suited to a first-past-the-post system, where standing for election in marginal seats could attract more attention to green ideas than standing in "safe" seats, where a huge majority for one party or another emboldened some voters to vote Green. Today, thanks largely to proportional representation, the U.K. Greens have managed to have several of their members elected to the European Parliament, which, in turn, has allowed them to benefit from the resources made available through the elected posts. Nevertheless, Parkin concluded, the electoral system and the drain on financial resources means the U.K. party still suffers from the "tyranny of the volunteer" and an enduring ambivalence about power.

Pekka Haavisto, the former environmental minister of Finland, outlined the success of the Greens in Finland and Sweden as well as throughout Europe. He reminded people that countries such as Germany were not the only ones where green parties had achieved electoral success; unheralded Latvia, for example, had even elected a Green Prime Minister, Indulis Emsis. The long presence of the Greens in the European Parliament, he argued, is due to a very intense cooperation between the different green parties. This culminated in February 2004, when thirty-two green parties in twenty-nine countries united to establish the European Green Party. Haavisto saw this as a major milestone, not just in the history of the Greens, but for European and international politics in general. The new European party will continue to strengthen the solidarity among Greens throughout the continent and represented, Haavisto believed, "the beginning of a global orientation" for the green political movement.

Overall, the symposium constituted a stimulating and sometimes controversial mixture of reflection and analysis from people who were, and in some cases still are, active members of green political parties in various countries. The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the GHI will publish the proceedings of the symposium. The resulting book will undoubtedly be of interest to scholars and green activists worldwide, and will constitute the first stage of the process of transforming primary sources into historical scholarship.

Frank Zelko