

THE GREENS: GO OUT AND LIVE DIFFERENTLY*



GALL

BY CAROLYN DUNN

"...to know/That which before us lies in daily life,/Is the prime Wisdom..."

— The Angel Raphael,
Book VIII, "Paradise Lost"

The Greens, who have been organized into a successful political party since 1981 in western Europe and constitute a movement in much of the rest of the world, have heard the angel. They adhere to any line of thought and action which understands, heals and protects "that which before us lies in daily life." The Greens, whether party or movement, face a central paradox. In the Kentucky poet/farmer Wendell Berry's words, "nobody can do anything to heal a planet," but it is the planet which desperately needs healing, and the only way it can receive the care it needs is to start the process at the level of our immediate homes and communities. The German Green Party established four "principles of unity," through which they hope to effect the changes needed: ecology, grassroots democracy, social responsibility and nonviolence.

As one might imagine with such a broad agenda, there have been hours of hot political debate about not only the abstract philosophical issues involved in the "principles of unity," but also about how to get them into practice. One such practical question has to do with whether or not to concentrate on the education of people to Green principles at primarily a local level, with the aim of starting local action groups and task forces, or to use the principle of "carpe diem" ("seize the day") by taking advantage of the high level of ecological and peace-seeking consciousness which world events have created, to promote the basic Green agenda of antimilitarism and earth stewardship at national levels. The Green movement meeting held in Berkeley, California in 1985, dealt at some length with this split, and it continues to plague the "IC" (Interregional Committees of Correspondence) meetings in the United States. It is the argument of those who "believe there should only be a loose network of local organization and the clearinghouse should merely be a mail drop," against those who believe "that if we are to build a viable Green movement and eventually a Green Party, there must be different levels of organizing: local, regional, mega-regional and global... (with) control always... at the local level." (from "The History of the Committees of Correspondence," 1988).

In the past half decade, the Greens as a party have won nearly 2,000 city council seats in France, 15% of the vote in Britain, and having representation in all the city governments and in Parliament in West Germany (representing about 8% of the votes). They have made inroads in Spain and in the countries of Eastern Europe, as well as Canada, Australia and the U.S., at least as a Green movement sympathetic to the economic and environmental tenets of the Party.

Not that anyone still needs evidence that the world is in serious trouble on a variety of levels, but let me put before you again just a sampling of the problems we are facing today which may explain why a set of values such as the Greens are placing on the table have become so compelling to so many people:

— From the beginning of civilization to about 1950, the population of the earth was about 2½ billion people; in the past 40 years we have grown to 5.2 billion.

—The number of children who starve to death daily, worldwide, is 40,000.

—Egypt, for the first time in 5,000 years, cannot feed its people; it imports not only almost all its food, but most other commodities as well.

—The number of animals killed for meat per hour in the U.S. is 500,000.

—The U.S. now has an estimated 3 million people without homes.

—The U.S. yearly military defense spending is \$290-\$300 billion.

—The U.S. ranks first, worldwide, in military spending, global military bases and naval fleets, and number of nuclear bombs and warheads.

—We would be saving in the U.S. 300,000 barrels of oil per day if GM and Ford had not convinced our government to roll back automobile efficiency standards in 1986.

—In the U.S. it will take only 50 years, at the present deforestation rate, before not a single tree will remain standing.

Wendell Berry again: "I think we have hardly begun to realize the gravity of the mess we are in... we are a nation of fantasists. We believe, apparently, in the infinite availability of finite resources."

How do the Greens propose to turn things around? Through the ten "Greens Key Values":

1) Ecological Wisdom: recognition of human life as part of the whole fabric of living things; living within the finite resource limits of the planet; promotion of sustainable agriculture; respect for self-regulating natural systems.

2) Grassroots Democracy: In the U.S. this entails a relearning of community responsibility and civic vitality. Worldwide, it is recognition that local problems are best dealt with at the local level, and that global problems will diminish as local problems are responsibly dealt with.

3) Personal and Social Responsibility: Development of more humane responses to human suffering; community-controlled education systems; encouragement of "simplicity and moderation."

4) Future Focus: Guide thinking toward long-range implications of actions and decisions, rather than short-range self-interest. Incorporate "quality of life" into economic growth issues.

5) Global Responsibility: Promotion of Green values worldwide, helping other countries attain self-sufficiency within these basic values, and working on the question of how to do these things without "creating just another enormous nation-state."

6) Nonviolence; Promotion of demilitarization. The West German Green Party wants unilateral disarmament and military defense supplanted by "social defense" (nonviolent protests: marches, sit-ins, education). Even adherents admit this kind of defense will not stop invading armies, but that it will by its very nature so frustrate any forcefully imposed government that that government will be rendered ineffective eventually. It is a position which should not condone any military intervention, much less one called "Operation Just Cause" (the U.S. invasion of Panama, December 20, 1989).

7) Decentralization: Turning the present power pyramid upside-down. Instead of the few deciding law and policy for the many, the impetus, as well as the final decision, for regulation will be the prerogative and the responsibility of the citizenry, within communities and small regions. Representation at any level will be recallable if votes cast misrepresent the community consensus on any issue.

8) Postpatriarchal Values: Replacement of "the cultural ethics of dominance and control with more cooperative ways of interacting." Encouragement of a better mix of rational with intuitive problem-solving.

9) Community-based Economics: Promotion of small-scale economics, employee ownership and workplace democracy. A counterbalancing, and eventual elimination of, the "dominant attitude that reduces nature to a stockpile of resources." (Robyn Eckersly, Australian political theorist). Partial reestablishment of community-level direct exchange of goods and services, worker-owned businesses and revolving community loan funds are all possibilities in effecting the transition from large-scale to small-scale economics, and in fact have been successfully tried in several communities in the U.S. and Europe.

Because economics are so closely allied to environment, the West German city of Freiberg has become a paradigm of Green community-based economics in action. It established a municipal Department for Environmental Affairs in 1985, which immediately set up an "Eco-phone" to serve as a connecting link between the public and local government, so that questions about development and environmental polluters, and practical suggestions on finding common ground between growth interests and environmental concerns be voiced easily and quickly to elected officials.

Freiberg also instituted advanced systems of recycling (including the recycling of plastic, clothing and aluminum), mass transit (with an interchangeable ticket good for both bus and trolley systems), and teaching programs. City-level environmental impact reports are required for "every planned structure in the city — buildings, streets, new highways...."

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*English-language translation of the Flemish-Belgian Green's name.