

## **Politicization and depoliticization of ecology: Polish and Romanian perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

*In this article, I comparatively assess the heyday of political ecology in Romania and Poland during the revolutionary and the early transformation years. From the pathways of two key political ecologists, Marcian Bleahu and Radosław Gawlik, I first explore the place of scientific ecology under 'real existing socialism', then its politicisation when state socialism crumbled, and finally the de-politicisation of ecological issues when a liberal environmental policy framework was adopted, as part of 'transition to the free market' in the early 1990s. In an ensuing section, I provide a short literature review dealing with political ecology and environmentalism in the region, pointing out that the short period of momentum for political ecology has been grossly misunderstood. On the one hand, the dominant perspective of the transition, that of liberal modernization, considers political ecology as postmaterialist, thus impossible under state socialism. On the other hand, their adversaries rooted in critical or postcolonial studies, view political ecology as allied to the left, thus difficult to comprehend in opposition to state socialism. Without denying the relevance of both perspectives, this contribution shows how the period substantiates a pragmatist take. The distinctive cases of Gawlik and Bleahu illustrate that a crucial constraint for politicization of ecology is the degree to which ideo-theoretical perspectives overall, and especially on catch-up modernization, whether Marxian or liberal, can colonize and neutralize environmental controversy. The conclusion suggests how this new approach could launch a differentiated yet symmetric approach to the history of political ecology in both Eastern and Western Europe.*

**Keywords:** political ecology, politicisation, environmentalism, Poland, Romania, post-socialism, transition, transformation.

## 1. Introduction

This article touches on an almost forgotten history: the history of political ecology movements in Central and Eastern Europe during the revolutionary and early transformation period. It reviews how ecology in CEE started gaining political traction during the last years of state socialism, how this wave had its heyday during the revolutionary years, and then gradually broke in the early transformation period. Importantly, the historical distance that has meanwhile arisen, which now includes to the period of 'transition', permits a fresh analysis. Now we can consider this entire trajectory without concern over our positions in it influencing it somehow. From this distance, we zoom in on two key actors in these movements from sharply contrasting backgrounds. They are from geographically close but otherwise very different countries: Marcian Bleahu, from Romania, and Radosław Gawlik, from Poland.

The picture that emerges, from the viewpoints of Bleahu and Gawlik, are then confronted by two opposite ideo-theoretical perspectives that have dominated both general conversation and academic literature on the topic of political ecology in CEE. The first informs the concept of 'transition' itself, and can be called liberal modernist or liberal evolutionist. This position typically recognizes the politicisation of ecology as 'postmaterialist': as a product of rising welfare standards in liberal capitalist 'advanced industrial society' (Inglehart, 1997) – or in a more recent variation: as a formative part of the emergence of a 'risk society' and its 'reflexive modernization' in late-capitalism (Beck et al., 2003; Giddens, 1996). Countering these optimistic approaches, a second perspective draws its inspiration from a broad range of theories that profess a critical stance to liberal capitalism, often with a Marxian touch. Those influenced by postcolonial theory, for example, typically point out that an 'imagined West' after 1989 legitimized international funding schemes, that patronized and depoliticized social movements. This 'NGO-ization' and 'professionalization' of movements in the 1990s meant their disciplining by a Western-imposed liberal state order through rendering them 'fundable causes' and framing them as 'a backward other in need of Western advice' (cit. Böröcz 2006; cit. Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013; cit. Jehlička et al., 2015; cf. Lang, 1997; Gille, 2007).

This article has emerged from the pragmatic remark that, while there are undoubtedly important appreciable elements in both perspectives, they also both push an understanding of the intense wave of political ecology during the revolutionary period as a 'surrogate': as an unreal proxy for nationalist, neoliberal or otherwise anti-communist ideologies, repressed during state socialism (cf. Dawson, 1996). This is however, and understandably so, at odds with both Gawlik's and Bleahu's own takes on the matter. Rather than choosing or disqualifying the one perspective in favour of the other, then, or attempting to integrate them in a new all-encompassing synthesis, this contribution shows that while both were and may remain useful for providing direction and inspiration to policymakers, activists, intellectuals, scientists, or politicians, they tend to obscure political reality. Or in more abstract terms, by taking the Romanian and Polish trajectories of political ecology as focal point, this article

substantiates the thesis that the degree of politicisation of the environment can be construed as the degree to which ideo-theoretical perspectives *in general* are unsuccessful in neutralizing experiential and environmental controversy.

The core of the empirical corpus consists of biographical research and two in-depth interviews with the said actors, but is complemented by a wide range of interviews with other actors and analysis of historical works. Before moving to the descriptive part in section 3 below, section 2 below lays out the hypothesis in more detail, and includes comments on periodisation, and on the selection of Bleahu and Gawlik – and Romania and Poland – as case studies. Perhaps somewhat out of the ordinary, the review of the literature and the above discussion over the said theoretical perspectives will take place only afterwards, in a section 4.

## 2. Approach and preliminary remarks

Theoretically this article follows the pragmatist tradition in sociology. Under its ‘abductive principle’, *a* is inferred as the most plausible way to account for *b*, in view of orienting ourselves in our surroundings, and to disregard some other possibilities, which nevertheless remain possible. As noted by the French pragmatist Francis Chateauraynaud, pragmatism fits naturally onto research to political ecological controversy: both have the experienced environment as their point of departure (cf. Chateauraynaud, 2015; 2016, *Table 1* and *Fig. 4*, pp. 1-2).<sup>1</sup>

### Hypothesis

The syllogism below, which outlines the reasoning of this article, varies on one of the founders of pragmatism, the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Peirce (1931, Ch. 7, par. 2). The hypothesis is underlined:

After adopting a liberal evolutionist (postmaterialist) perspective on the politicization of ecology, it becomes harder to take it into account outside of affluent socio-economic standards and stable liberal democracy.

After adopting a critical (Marxian) perspective on the politicization of ecology, it becomes harder to take it into account in state socialist societies.

If the degree of politicization of ecology is recognized as inversely related to the degree to which any perspective is successful in fixing, colonizing and finally neutralizing attention for environmental controversy, its heyday after the disintegration of state socialism but before neoclassical economic theory came to dominate in Poland and Romania, would be a matter of course.

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion on abductivism and pragmatism in political research in general: e.g. the work of Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, Ch. 2).

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Hence, there is reason to suspect that the hypothesis is true, and that the precise composition of an ideo-theoretical perspective is only of secondary and contingent importance.

### **Choice of actors**

It can of course be argued that it is impossible to substantiate the above broad hypothetical claim with only two in-depth interviews. However, note that, although it is certainly true that additional research on this topic would be of great added value, the hypothesis does not depend on the interviews directly, but rather on demonstrating the politicisation of ecology during the disintegration of the state socialist authority, and its depoliticisation when new perspectives over 'transition to market economy' provided a new direction and framework for placing and framing environmental concern as well as for environmental policy making. This is itself hardly in question, as we will see below more in detail, confirmed not only by Gawlik and Bleahu but by a wide range of additional sources and existing literature.

The reason of taking Gawlik and Bleahu into account, then, is not primarily to substantiate the hypothesis, but first negative in character: both provide powerful counter-narratives which destabilize both the above mentioned theoretical perspectives in favour of on the ground realities. For such destabilisation to be sufficiently convincing, it is first important to remark that both Gawlik and Bleahu were key leaders of political ecology movements in their countries for a substantial period of time. Their leading role was recognized, for example, by the European Federation of Green Parties, the precursor of the contemporary European Green Party (EGP), which attempted to strike links in the former Warsaw pact in the early 1990s, and identified Bleahu and Gawlik as the pivotal figures in green politics in Poland and Romania respectively. Most importantly, also the domestic political elites considered them key figures: Gawlik and Bleahu served respectively as Minister and State Secretary of Environment, between 1993 and 1994 and between 1997 and 2001.

### **Gawlik's Poland and Bleahu's Romania: 1960-2004**

The focus of this contribution rests on the revolutionary and early transformation years: in Poland from the foundation of *Wolność i Pokój* (WiP, Freedom and Peace) in 1985 to the first free elections of 1991; in Romania from the murder on Ceaușescu 1989 to the transfer of power to the *Convenția Democrată Română* (Romanian Democratic Convention, CDR) in 1996. The overall scope is larger however: the description below starts in the 1960s, when Bleahu's career took off, and ends in 2004, when Gawlik helped to found *Zieloni 2004*. This long-term view is informed by the above hypothesis, which depends on mapping a longer-term trajectory of politicisation and depoliticisation under respectively expiring or newly emergent perspectives for grasping the environment, and only then on demonstrating the special status in this regard

of the revolutionary and early transformation years, when such perspectives were entirely absent.

The choice for Gawlik's Poland and Bleahu's Romania is first and foremost informed by their contrast within formerly Soviet-dominated Europe. Besides a long list of other notable differences, the most telling difference between Romania and Poland is perhaps the above-mentioned caesurae of revolutionary and early transformation period: the disintegration of the state socialist regime in Poland started the earliest, and in Romania the very latest. On top of that: from the early 1960s onward, Bleahu was a member of the communist scientific establishment, and recognized as leading geologist, while Gawlik, on the other hand, politicized ecology as a member of the radical Polish underground in the 1980s, enthralled by environmental sciences, but mostly as an amateur. Precisely due to this poignant difference in national environment and personal background, then, found similarities in the processes of politicisation are likely of wider relevance, certainly if they also fit with known trajectories of political ecologists elsewhere, notably in Western Europe, for example.<sup>2</sup>

## Tracing eco-politicisation in Romania and Poland

### A communist environment: Romania and Bleahu

Marcian Bleahu was born in Braşov, in Transylvania, in 1924. After having served in the army during the Second World War, he graduated in 1949 from a study in Geology at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Bucharest. Bleahu claims to have been a silent supporter of the outlawed *Partidul Național Liberal* (PNL) at the time, but refrained from active engagement.<sup>3</sup> Instead he started an academic career at the Geology department, and from this position was affected by political developments: Bleahu's familial background was partly in Romanian aristocracy and partly bourgeois, and per consequence he was banned from teaching in 1961.<sup>4</sup> Strikingly, only four years later, he joined the *Partidul Comunist Român* (PCR):

Why? That is funny again... the reason why I became member of the party. (...) We had a huge car crash. Our driver was dead immediately. Our director had several fractures, and died the second day. And me, I escaped. (...) Then the Minister responsible for geology came to the hospital. 'It is all very tragic etcetera, etcetera.' And when I left the hospital he said to me: 'Listen, the rector is dead.

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<sup>2</sup> The comparative strategy obviously resonates with Mill's direct method of agreement and is further informed by the work of Sheila Jasanoff in science and technology studies, notably in her book *Designs on Nature* (2005, Ch. 1), and historical comparative theory as laid out by Ludolf Herbst (2004).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There was also the option of more active resistance at the time. Armed resurgent groups had a significant presence in Romania until the late 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> His father was a notary and on his maternal line, Bleahu claims descentance from Constantin Brâncoveanu, Prince of Wallachia between 1688 and 1714.

You have to become the new rector of the Geological Institute.’ As rector I was obliged to enter the Communist Party. I never had any political taste for it or things like that. There was the political charge, and I had to accept it.

It is telling that Bleahu carefully separates the formal political act of becoming a PCR-member from his convictions or engagement. Of course, Bleahu is doing so in part to dissociate himself, ex post-facto, from his communist past. However his stance also confirms a well-known general trait within ‘real existing socialism’: a radical disjuncture between the national public sphere and the private sphere (Betts, 2010; Wolle, 1998). Shortly after Stalin’s death, Chroesjtov signalled that, in the SU sphere of influence, fear for assassination was to change into fear for exclusion from public life. Under these new circumstances, a disengaged, humorous, or along the years almost openly cynical lip service to communism became a possibility for many, certainly for those, like Bleahu, whose family history was a difficult fit for the communist narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Even so, communists could still maintain their control over the public sphere with this narrative, in large part due its promise to ‘catch-up’ and then overrun the liberal West. Marxist-Leninism offered an internally highly coherent theoretical panorama along these lines, idealist and far removed from the actual environment, but precisely for this reason very successful in providing hope and a progressive vision to those facing the desperate social situations and economic catastrophes in the region after World War II. In the slipstream of Kautsky and then Lenin, Marxist-Leninist theory managed to do so by proclaiming ‘hard’ sociological-scientific laws on how the downfall of bourgeois capitalism was unavoidable, thus, the communist party ahead of its time, and opposition to its leadership both reactionary and in vain. This stance, of course, suffocated socio-political debate and the possibility for internal differentiation – and meant that communists were per definition out of touch with their environment (cf. the critique of Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 12-23). Leninism effectively annihilated attentiveness to the environmental in its broadest, literal sense by claiming that ‘there is no alternative’, to use its later Thatcherian modification – or *alternativlos*, in Merkel’s contemporary ordo-liberal version.

Typically, when the Marxist-Leninist rationale installed itself, it did so under violent Stalinist totalitarian attempts. It was during such a period in Romania, under the militant Stalinist Gheorghiu-Dej, that Bleahu was banned from teaching, as Marxist-Leninist sociological theory also invaded natural science. In Russia such attempts had already resulted in huge disasters, most infamously Lysenko’s ‘proletarian’ experiments in agricultural genetics, causing mass starvation in the Russian countryside (Joravsky, 1970; Suny, 1998, pp. 283,

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<sup>5</sup> Noted, of course, that ‘totalitarianism’ was never that total as theorists like Hannah Arendt claimed it to be. Rather, Lenin’s famous dictum ‘under communism nothing is private’ paradoxically produced its own radically secluded private sphere, to the degree that the things associated with it (holiday houses, family life, hobby’s, etc.) have nowadays grown into the most cherished of memories of state socialist times (Betts, 2010, p. 2).

371).<sup>6</sup> After Stalin's death and Chroesjtov's change of course the Warsaw Pact communist parties gradually retreated into accepting 'international standards' in the natural sciences. This entailed that formerly externalised elements could be readmitted in the sciences – provided that the party's position in power was firmly established, and issues such as party membership were formally 'in order'. This is precisely what happened to Bleahu; tellingly, his readmission to the academic geological sciences in 1965 coincided with the replacement of Gheorghiu-Dej by Nicolae Ceaușescu, then still a moderate reformer. Under Ceaușescu's rule, Bleahu was to have a proficient career as a geologist, mountaineer, and internationally acclaimed specialist in tectonics, publishing multiple internationally acclaimed works, and gaining a degree of public visibility after a national television appearance on the 1977 Vrancea earthquake, and a range of popular introductions to geology in Romanian.

Under these 'normalized' circumstances the developments in ecology in Anglo-Saxon scientific communities from the late 1950s onward also permeated Romania – and the rest of Central and Eastern Europe – with relative ease. The term "ecology", having its origin in the German biological sciences, was already well-known.<sup>7</sup> Its classic positivist-objectivist but simultaneously holist orientation, its emphasis on networks of interlinked relations, and on mutual dependence, all seemed a perfect fit to the socialist worldview. Left-leaning ecological works, such as Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971) for example, became available in Russian and were extensively commented in the Soviet press, and of Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) lengthy excerpts also became available.<sup>8</sup> World-system theory was also carefully followed, most notably, of course, the Club of Rome and its ground-breaking *Limits to Growth* (1972) (cf. Cholakov, 1994, p. 38; Komarov, 1980).<sup>9</sup> The first spheres in which these works circulated were, of course, those of Bleahu and his colleagues: working within natural sciences and the substantial state socialist managerial classes trained in forestry and agriculture. Unsurprisingly, then, and further pushed by Cold War competition over moral superiority, Romania and most other socialist states in

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<sup>6</sup> In his 'proletarian' agricultural theories, Trofim Lysenko claimed that food crops could survive the Siberian winter, on the environmental influence on heredity in genetics, preferring the idea of mutual aid in this regard over Darwinian competition, favoured by Stalin in part as a result of Lysenko's simple peasant family background, but leading millions to starve in the countryside after its forced implementation.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'ecology' was coined by the German philosopher and naturalist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 (Haeckel, 1866).

<sup>8</sup> This with a note of thanks to Laurent Courmel, whom has made an important correction from a previous version of this article: *Silent Spring* did circulate but was not fully translated and commented on in Russian.

<sup>9</sup> The developments in world system modelling which lead to *Limits to Growth* were closely monitored by some of the highest Soviet authorities even before the report was published (Rindzevičiūtė, 2015). The influence of *The Limits* and the other mentioned translations is clear in Komarov's samizdat publication *The Destructions of Nature in the Soviet Union*, 1980 (cf. p. 138). On the intriguing story of Komarov himself: Altshuler, Golubchikov and Mnatsakanyan, 1992.

the region were quick to enact large and highly ambitious packages of environmental legislation from the 1960s onwards. Checks on industrial pollution were introduced, conservation measures were increased, and national parks, of which the first dated back to the pre-communist period, were extended and increased in number.

### **An anti-communist environment: Poland and Gawlik**

Gawlik was born in 1957, and grew up under the above-sketched conditions of 'real existing socialism', in the 1960s and 1970s, in a village not too far from Wrocław, western Poland, in a regular Polish family. In contrast to Bleahu his interest in the environment was unmistakably politically charged when it first developed, and firmly opposed to Marxist-Leninism:

the Oder was as black as pitch. And the fish that got caught, even when they were still alive, they smelled like phenol. People tried to eat the fish, but even on a plate after frying they still reeked of phenol [...] and I started to read about the subject. I think that at the end of 1970s the *Black Book of the Censorship*<sup>10</sup> came into my hands, through my brother-in-law whom had to do with people from the opposition. From the Black Book I learned that the information about the environment was simply censored, and the communists imposed the barrier.

[My engagement] had to do with a certain place, a matter of some sensitivity to and observing environmental degradation, and also with the knowledge that I possessed after reading the censorship book. Then I began to develop this interest.

It is undeniable that, for Gawlik's ecological engagement, his family acquaintances and his acquisition of the *Black Book of Censorship* were of crucial importance – but of course, it is at least equally inconceivable without the actual environmental degradation. Finally, in Poland in the 1980s, troubled by martial law and heavy economic crisis, it became increasingly problematic to legitimize repressive measures with the communist perspective on catch-up modernization. Overall, biophysical ecological problems turned into major gathering points for oppositional political energy, and powerful indicators for the moral bankruptcy of existing state socialism. The communist establishment,

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<sup>10</sup> In 1977 Tomasz Strzyżewski, an official of the Polish censorship or *Main Office of Control of Press, Publications and Shows* (GUKPPIW), left Poland for Sweden with one of two copies of the guidelines of his office, which were reprinted in 1977 and 1978 in Polish in London by ANEKS publishers, and then spread in Poland as *samizdat* (large samples were published by NOWa, or Independent Publishing House, related to KOR, in 1977). A translation in English also appeared (Curry, 1984). The book contained guidelines for covering up sensitive environmental information. It was forbidden to talk or write about 'anything that gives information on the disaster in X', or 'about any increase in deaths from XY', about the carcinogenicity of asbestos, or even about the noxiousness of the plastics used in artificial Christmas trees.



meanwhile, stuck to treating ecology as ideationally inherently connected to their cause:

They [the communists] kept treating it [the ecological question] as a valve, let people read, learn, and then they wouldn't be political. 'They are into some ecology' [laughing].

In 1985 Gawlik's old activist friend Leszek Budrewicz assisted in organising a hunger strike in support of Marek Adamkiewicz, who had been imprisoned after refusing military service on moral grounds.<sup>11</sup> The ultimately successful action led to the foundation of *Wolność i Pokój* (WiP, Freedom and Peace), which presented the first sign of open oppositional life since the repression of *Solidarność* and declaration of martial law in 1981. Strengthened by the *glasnost* in Russia, and in contrast to the underground manoeuvring of post-'81 *Solidarność*, WiP took up a tactics of radical aboveground transparency. Strikingly, it also broke with *Solidarność* by stripping its oppositional stance of any allusion to any ideological perspective (Kenney, 2002). WiP-members were radically political in the private sphere, of course, but wherever they appeared in public they took a distance from anything that came close to 'politics'. Rather, when in public, they claimed the moral high ground next to a politics of style, surrealistically mimicking rather than criticising state socialist discourse, or provocatively exploiting loopholes within it.

Similar to the 1975 Helsinki Agreements in the case of human rights, then, the communist party's allegiance to ecology and natural science soon provided a WiP with a perfect niche for activism. Within the movement, Gawlik accepted to become responsible for ecology in 1985, and one year later, in April 1986, Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded, due to a series of unexpected events during a power-failure stress test. The nuclear meltdown caused an acute meltdown of much of what remained of state socialist self-confidence. Its socio-socio-political is still underappreciated – partly, perhaps, because this radical revenge of contingency must also escape classical sociological theory (Kenney, 2001). Over the whole of socialist Europe, however, it did not simply arouse but also legitimized and broadened massive discontent. Especially in Poland and Hungary, from this point onward, a radical shift of perspective was increasingly supported within the communist parties themselves (Ther, 2016, Ch. 2).

On the radical end in Poland, meanwhile, the situation was efficiently exploited by Gawlik and WiP, leading to the largest public demonstrations since Jaruzelski proclaimed martial law in 1981. Gawlik had already been carefully planning monthly marches against metallurgic plant in Siechnice, threatening the water pollution in Wrocław, but Chernobyl propelled these actions onto a whole new level. Heavily policed but provided with the slogan "Police drinks the

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<sup>11</sup> In Podkowa Leśna, just outside of Warsaw.

same water!” the regime was effectively paralyzed, unable to do anything with its now hollow or even counterproductive theoretical premises.<sup>12</sup>

There were ironworks located in aquifers, it was simply ridiculous. This contaminated those aquifers, there were heavy metals in tap water... We had evidence for this and the communists couldn't deal with it. We were capturing those, those blatant nonsenses, right. When Chernobyl exploded and there was no information about it, you know, we started talking about it. I wouldn't say that there was some great ideology behind it.



**Picture 1:** “Close smelter Siechnice!” / “Chrome = cancer thus death” (<http://portal.tezeusz.pl>)

The tension between the public sphere and actually experienced biophysical reality grew to enormous proportions, and there were hardly any areas in which the schizophrenia became more physically tangible than in the government's discourse on the environment, still maintaining its ambitious policy designs, but very literally catastrophic in actual practice. As mentioned, under Stalin even hard scientific deviations from the party line could be repressed if needed, as out of line with the assumed objectivity of Marxist-Leninist sociological laws. In

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<sup>12</sup> In Polish: *Policja pije tą samą wodę!*

real existing socialism such practices had been abolished – but now it was precisely real objectivity that rebelled *against* it. Did Gawlik *use* the ecological hazard for his political agenda? Or was it the other way around, and did he depart from *objective* ecology, and from there to a political stance against the political regime? Even after being asked repeatedly, Gawlik himself cannot give a clear answer to this question; the two appear as inextricably intertwined – and this has clearly little to do with ex-post facto evasion or attempts at self-legitimation. Gawlik does assert that:

It was a very powerful thing. One hundred people could make a fuss and it became a subject of discussion, you know. The communists, whether they wanted it or not, right, and maybe they didn't talk about it in public, but for sure, in their circle, they had to talk about what could be done.

Actions followed against plans for a nuclear plant near *Żarnowiec*, intelligently reframed by WiP as 'Zarnobyl'.<sup>13</sup> It strengthened the general perception but also increasing self-perception among communists that their narrative and worldview, which, as mentioned, had always been highly idealist, had now permanently cut all worldly connections, losing touch with reality completely.

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<sup>13</sup> Recently an excellent article on the Polish nuclear protest was published in this journal, by Kacper Szulecki, Tomasz Borewicz and Janusz Waluszko (2015).



**Picture 2: Protests against the nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec** (<http://portal.tezeusz.pl>)

Together with economic and external political factors – Gorbatsjovism, the heavy financial and socio-economic crisis in Poland, hyperinflation, pressure of international creditors – WiP and the ecological malaise so pushed the regime into accepting a search for a new perspective (cf. Kenney 2001; 2002). The government soon felt forced to give in to some of the demands of WiP – something it had never done to any opposition grouping before, including Solidarność – to close the Siechnice smelter, and abort plans in Żarnowiec. About the same time, the government de-criminalised Solidarność, starting talks with it after wild strikes erupted over real wage controversies at the end of the 1980s. The Round Table Agreement was signed in April 1989, and partly free elections followed in June.

### **Negotiated revolution in Poland**

The situation in Poland is most certainly oversimplified if described as a victory for ‘the Polish people’, as it is often presented, as a unified block led by the heroic opposition of Solidarność.

RG: Most of WiP's people thought that there was some risk, just as the radical part of *Solidarność*, called *Solidarność Walcząca* (SW, Fighting *Solidarność*). Kornel Morawiecki [from SW] said that it was a betrayal and so on, a collusion with the communists, and we had to take a stand. He remained hidden, if I remember well, until 1991 [laughing]. And some of my friends are hiding until today [laughing], just in case.

The negotiations toward the Round Table Agreement were carried by already established elites. Besides the communist establishment, the opposition consisted of known economists and intellectuals, church representatives, and a few trade union leaders. In the radical WiP-affiliated circles this *Solidarność*-affiliated oppositional establishment was generally seen as the “old opposition”, and some dismissed the Agreement altogether, as a communist plotted attempt at normalisation (Kenney, 2002; Kennedy 2002; Ash, 1990; cf. Szulecki et al., 2015, p. 29). In many ways their intuition was quite right. Many of the *Solidarność*-affiliated invites to the Round Table had a rich past in the communist party and had only dissented from the party line when the crisis of the 1980s had compelled them to do so. Tellingly, the communist constitution was amended, without a general referendum thereafter.<sup>14</sup> Overall, then, the Agreement is not assessed that badly as a first step toward radically updating the narrative on ‘catch-up modernization’, replacing the outdated Marxist-Leninist version with a neoliberal one.

### **The violent intra-party coup in Romania**

Similar to Poland, Ceaușescu's Romania had to deal with the same difficulties in the 1980s, arising from an ever-widening gap between the state-centralised system and the real ecological economic and ecological situation. Different than Jaruzelski in Poland, however, Ceaușescu had both the possibility and the will to choose for severe repression of the tension that emerged, rather than giving in to reform. Only when the external pressure finally became too high, due to the events in Poland and elsewhere, did internal opposition within the Romanian communist party emerge and succeed. The subsequent execution of the dictator and power grab by Ion Iliescu is hence best described as a well-orchestrated intra-party coup, in response to events in the region. The old party elite managed to hold on to power, changing its name into National Salvation Front (*Frontul Salvării Naționale*, FSN) (on this period: Antohi and Tismăneanu 2000; Deletant, 2001). Like Poland, neither the socialist establishment nor the actual opposition were eager to use word ‘revolution’ at the time. Quite typically, Bleahu gives only a short comment the collapse of one party rule in Romania, in December 1989:

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<sup>14</sup> A replacement for the “post-sovereign” constitution, as Andrew Arato called this type of constitution-making, only came in 1997 when a fully new constitution was drafted. Still, it was only validated by a referendum with insufficient turnout. (Arato, 2016).

Ok, good, there was a ‘revolution’ and I participated as well, I went to the demonstrations and all that. And actually, these were led by Iliescu. [...] In my opinion, you know, Iliescu is a criminal.

Elsewhere Bleahu refers to the events as a ‘bouleversement’ – meaning upheaval, not revolution.

### **Ecological regime-extension in post-socialist Romania**

Under these circumstances, an ecological party was founded by an “old friend” of Iliescu – the poet, apiarist and eco-publicist Toma George Maiorescu – shortly before the first free elections in May 1990. In Bleahu’s words, the foundation of the party was a direct attempt of the FSN to anticipate and incorporate the wave of political ecology wave elsewhere in Europe. The new party was called the *Miscarea Ecologista din Romania* (MER, Ecological Movement Romania) and Bleahu, as a prominent Romanian geologist, was asked and accepted to become a leading member. A second ecological party was also founded, called PER. After the first elections, they received respectively 12 and 8 seats – around 5 percent of the total vote (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010, pp. 1599-1600).

In June 1990, violent anti-government riots in Budapest led Iliescu to call on groups of rural miner communities to defend the government, secretly joined by one of the successors of the *Securitate*, the SRI (Deletant, 2001, pp. 218-19).<sup>15</sup> Iliescu remained seated as President, but the government fell, and then fell again. In October 1991, finally, Bleahu’s MER was asked to form a government with the FSN – in an obvious gesture toward multi-party democracy. Shortly after the coup on *Ceaușescu* the first Environmental Ministry had already been erected, over which Bleahu now came to be in charge.

*MB:* Ecologism was something new and politically appealing at the moment. It was already known by biologists, naturally, as it is originally a biological term that talks about biotopes, biodiversity, and so on. And so, partly because it was a notion so new in politics, the world came for it. It connected a very good sort of people: the Ecologists.

After Bleahu’s term as Minister, however, the MER disintegrated alongside the existing regime and its certainties. Bleahu had nevertheless become enthusiastic for ecological politics, partly due to attendance to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit during his term as minister, and co-founded yet another party, the FER

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<sup>15</sup> Violent repression led to several deaths and thousands of wounded among the protesters. Bleahu’s remark on Iliescu’s criminality links to the court case running against Iliescu, reopened at the time of the interview, on charges of crimes against humanity in relation to these events.

(*Federacia Ecologista din Romania*). FER now turned *against* Iliescu's FSN by becoming a member of the unified opposition assembled under the Romanian Democratic Convention (*Convenția Democrată Română*, CDR). In May 1996, the Convention managed to replace the FSN. After five years of absence, Bleahu entered parliament once again, as FER's only senator.

### **The Ecological Forum within the Freedom Union in Poland**

Back in Poland, the new catch-up modernization narrative, largely agreed upon at the Round Table, quickly enabled intra-elite consensus to return, as the historian Philip Ther has recently suggested (Ther, 2016). As one of the very few invites from WiP and the 'new generation', Gawlik finally chose to join the deliberations, in one of the sub-tables on environment, and therewith inserted himself into the new order. For the first partly free elections he ran on the list of *Solidarność*. He was elected to the *Sejm* and, after some reshuffling, became part of the liberal democratic *Unia Wolności* (UW, Freedom Union) in 1994 – led by Balcerowicz, one of the crucial post-'89 figures with a strong background in the communist party who, faced by martial law and the Polish financial and economic crisis in the 1980s, turned to *Solidarność* and then the Chicago School for solving Poland's deep financial and socio-economic problems (Ther, 2016). As such Balcerowicz grew into one of the main architects of neoliberal 'shock therapy' privatisation and deregulation, for having Poland 'catch-up with the West' once again – a crucial inventor and translator of the new perspective of liberal modernization that soon caught on in the entire region. Within the UW, so at least formally in agreement with this perspective, Gawlik now co-founded the Ecological Forum (FE, *Forum Ekologiczne*). The UW became one of the winners of the 1997 elections, and Balcerowicz forged a coalition with the conservative *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność* (AWS), led by Buzek.

RG: I think that he [Balcerowicz] didn't want to appoint me to this post. According to him I was a green fundamentalist, and actually he was right [laughing].

Gawlik's positioning here must perhaps be taken with ex-post facto grain of salt: today, the neoliberal framework is far less popular, certainly in the green circles Gawlik is still part of. Gawlik's self-depiction here has partly been confirmed by other sources, however: within the framework of the UW, *Forum Ekologiczne* was not simply a UW-loyalist green-washing machine. Rather it politically monopolised the ecological theme to such an extent that it became almost impossible for Balcerowicz and Buzek to ignore Gawlik for the post on environment (De Boer, 2015).<sup>16</sup> Competition with the post-communist SLD, into

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<sup>16</sup> Anne de Boer, personal interview, 1 May 2015. Anne de Boer was a co-founder of Groenlinks in 1989, the green party in the Netherlands, and co-founding member of the Green East-West Dialogue not long thereafter: the informal body of the European Federation of Green Parties facilitating contact and a forum for exchange on aid programs between Eastern and Western

which a post-Solidarnosc ecological group had just entered, might also have played a role in this regard (cf. Frankland, 2004, p. 138). In any way, Gawlik was appointed Secretary of State and Vice-Minister for the Environment – remarking on a ‘green moment’ within the political establishment.

*RG:* It was the perception and opinion of politicians at that time... A lot of things could be done because everyone accepted it. There was greater attention for ecological issues. We entered the new political system with the awareness of terribly polluted environment. The feeling that it is devastated. The recognition of green issues was much bigger at that time, in the early 1990s, than today.

### **The transition to liberal environmentalism: pushing a new perspective**

The period during which Bleahu and Gawlik became active as professional politicians for ecology parties or factions was a time in which the post-revolutionary slogan ‘transition to a multi-party system and market economy’ was introduced in Poland and, eventually, Romania. A new governmentality based on Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ of the free market came to be accepted by virtually the entire post-revolutionary political class, whether affiliated with the former establishment (Bleahu) or the radical opposition (Gawlik).

*RG:* I understand it like this. First of all, transformation was connected with some basic economic regulations and the economy: the value of money, the currency convertibility, economic freedom.

Within the new framework, Gawlik was quick to adopt a policy position which the political scientist Steven Bernstein coined as liberal environmentalist. Based on the premise that environmental aims could be fully reconciled with neoclassical liberal economic theory, if only its principles on autoregulative supply and demand were properly applied, liberal environmentalists aimed to eliminate top-down state control, and to internalise or included environmental ‘externalities’, such as identified and represented by Gawlik in the UW, into a market-based system. For doing so, a range of policies came to be advocated: ‘polluter pay principles’, environmental tax measures, requirements for environmental impact research, ‘precautionary principles’ in case of ‘environmental risk’, and so on, which altogether replaced the ideal of top-down state control (Bernstein, 2001; Neale 1997; Hobson 2013).

After state socialism had imploded, and the free market framework constructed, liberal environmentalism naturally made a victory lap in what now became known as the Viségrad region. Far before Western Europe, its policy proposals

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European greens. In his words, he “discovered” Gawlik for the European greens, which afterwards built up relations with Gawlik’s Ecological Forum.



were adopted in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland already in 1990 and 1991 (Vargha, 1992), as well as in Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltics some years later. With the full disappearance of state socialism as a major counterpoint, also globally nothing held back its proponents any longer, and during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 liberal environmentalism made its global breakthrough, naturally under vocal support from Central and Eastern European participants (Bernstein 2001).

*RG:* From an ecological perspective, it [transformation] was connected to the fact that we introduced this whole body of environmental legislation which didn't exist during communism. There were some interesting elements that we managed to continue quite well, for example the *Narodowy Fundusz Ochrony Środowiska* [NFOS, National Fund for Environmental Protection, founded by the socialist government in 1989]. But in these cases there was the area of various practices, and the money that was involved in it, that we had to find out about, and somehow include in the new economic system. And then there was the construction of ecological infrastructure: during communism, there were basically no sewage works, for example.

Bleahu was one of the attendees in Rio, in his position as Minister of Environment. He came to accept the change of regime as necessary, but unsurprisingly, Bleahu warned against all too dramatic change. Romania, during Bleahu's time in office, had started large-scale land reform, and became the defining feature during these years. The large Romanian agricultural sector, which had been completely nationalised under Gheorghiu-Dej, was reprivatized to meet the free market standards, resulting in a chaotic situation around property rights.

*MB:* The process of giving back all the domains had started, all the agricultural farms, to the old owners expropriated by the communist party. For the new agricultural laws introduced at this moment, it was impossible to find fitting jurisprudence and legal precedent.

The economic reorganisation, which reinstalled the property of formerly disowned large landowners, threatened the existing state-centred environmental policy framework. Bleahu considered himself its protector – carefully accepting elements of liberal environmentalism, but trying to maintain the much older policy ideals of state conservationism, often of German origin, with forestry regulation, natural monuments and national parks as its main focal points.

*MB:* I managed to successfully push for the condition that no terrain was given back that had become part of the national parks. There were not a lot of them at the time, three, or four, but anyway. And then the protection of natural

monuments. This was important: one of the biggest successes from my side.

The difference between Gawlik and Bleahu roughly reflects the most important dividing line in established politics at the time, between proponents of 'shock-therapy' or 'big bang' privatisation (Gawlik) and proponents 'gradualism', adopting a defensive line (Bleahu).<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that, when compared to their position prior to 1989, differentiation between Bleahu and Gawlik after 1989 clearly became more difficult, now that they were both engaged in eco-political currents within established politics.

### **Depoliticisation of ecology**

Altogether, the Polish and Romanian situations are very different, as well as Bleahu's and Gawlik's initial positions in these countries. In both cases however the disintegration of 'real existing socialist' perspectives coincided with the emergence of political ecology. Or to put it differently: both Bleahu and Gawlik found themselves at the centre of a wave of environmentalism that was particular to the revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary period in which the Marxist-Leninist modernization paradigm collapsed. Gawlik's case embodies the opening of hitherto hermetically closed ranks of the governing elite for radical environmental opposition during these years. Similarly, although part of the scientific establishment, Bleahu's story is also marked by a perceived need and pro-active attempt of the government to incorporate ecology and the environment. Politicisation of ecological issues elsewhere in the region during the 1980s further confirm this general pattern: Hungary (*Duna Kör*), East-Germany (*Bündnis 90, Grün-Ökologische Netzwerk Arche* and then the Green Party of the DDR), Czechoslovakia (*Diti zemì, Hnutí Duha, Brontosaurus* and finally the green party, *Strana zelených*) the Baltics (the human chain, the Phosporite wars, the tree-protection movement), and Bulgaria (*Ekoglasnost*).<sup>18</sup> So altogether, nothing really new is postulated when remarking that: the crisis of state-centrist perspectives regulating public life, the disintegration of hitherto well-established views upon society and how it should be organized, and above all the demise of doctrinal Marxist socio-political theory on catch-up modernization, coincided with the politicization of ecology.

This uplifting of political ecology was then followed by a presentation of a new framework and successful effort to integrate the environment and answer its questions afresh. There was an integration of environmental 'externalities' according to the neoclassical economic language, then much in vogue, or the 'colonization' of the environment by neoliberalism, in the less friendly terms of

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<sup>17</sup> A distinction that was partly the result of successful framing by the former: gradualism was not a self-articulated position, while favouring a big-bang was (cf. Balcerowicz, 1995, pp. 158-159).

<sup>18</sup> On these movements, e.g. French 1990; Jancar 1992; Jancar-Webster 1993; Kenney 2001; 2002; Pavlínek and Pickles, 2000, Ch. 7; Rupnik 1990; Szulecki et al., 2015.

the eco-political theorist Eric Swyngedouw – by effectively extending the bureaucratic regulatory machinery of the government, now guided by free market principles instead of state socialism (Swyngedouw, 2007). In both Bleahu's and Gawlik's case, the ruling political class simultaneously integrated much of the former opposition too: the environment in its broadest literal sense, then, was re-inscribed into a new politico-economic theory after 1989. This ended with a tragic note for both FER and Ecological Forum, as well as for virtually all other political ecology movements, parties and groups in Central and Eastern Europe. To most observers at the time this came as surprise. The glorious role of political ecology during the revolutionary years and its prominence in the early 1990s seemed altogether to promise a bright future. Most governments in the region took up rather pro-active positions with regards to ecological questions – most notably during the said Rio Summit, as mentioned. After the implosion of state socialism, however, many former activists started careers as consultants, business leaders, politicians, lawyers, or civil servants within the new administrations. If not entirely abolished, the movements themselves gradually professionalised, became grant-dependent, and depoliticised – or “NGO-ized” (Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013; Lang, 2000).

Of the many ecological (initially no ‘green’) party political enterprises founded in 1989 and 1990, very few acquired parliamentary seats like Gawlik and Bleahu. By the end of the decade, all ‘greens’ had disappeared from the political radar.<sup>19</sup> Bleahu's FER did not manage to cross the threshold in 2000. It finally morphed into the *Partidul Verde* (Green Party), which exists until today as an official member of the EGP, but as an extra-parliamentary party in the very margins of the Romanian political landscape. In Poland, the Ecological Forum ceased to exist after the UW collapsed in the elections in 2001. Four years later Gawlik and his friends founded *Zieloni 2004* (Greens 2004), which also became a member of the EGP, but has so far not managed to acquire parliamentary seats – and recently saw plenty of its younger members leave to found, ironically, a new socialist party: Razem, currently one of the few viable oppositional forces left in Poland. As we know all too well, Central European political elites, generally became disinterested and then outright hostile to eco-political ideas after the turn of the millennium.

### **Theoretical perspectives versus realities?**

One of the main dividing lines in the literature on political ecology, greens, and environmental movements in general, has been between those following an optimistic liberal evolutionist perspective, and those adopting a critical perspective, often with a Marxian touch. This theoretical opposition is easily construed as a continuation of the old Cold War dichotomies, of course, and also

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<sup>19</sup> With the notable exception of Latvia, where the Green Party (*Latvijas Zaļā partija*), strikingly, developed a nationalist-conservative green discourse, and has without interruption been represented in parliament after 1989.

overlaps with the post-1989 differences between Bleahu and Gawlik. Interestingly, then, in light of the assertions in the above Chapter, there are several compelling and thought-provoking turns to be traced here, with much wider implications than one might initially assume.

### **The evolutionary perspective**

The evolutionary perspective on political ecology and environmentalism, closely linked to liberal environmentalism and the concept of transition, builds on liberal modernization theory, and was dominant until quite recently. It typically considers political environmentalism as the product of a 'postmaterialist' value package emerging due to socio-economic standards of 'late-capitalism' or 'advanced industrial society'. As such it associates them with stable parliamentary democratic institutions and a high degree of socio-economic welfare (Inglehart 1971; 1977; 1997). Strikingly, Ronald Inglehart, who first coined the term 'postmaterialism', developed his projections under strong influence from classic Marxist socio-economic reductionism and its conceptions of socio-economically determined historical stages, but applied to the American situation of the 1960s and 1970. Rather than predicting a communist future, he conceived the emergence of environmental and other 'new social movements' on this basis as the latest step in a linear and necessary process toward a more enlightened, more 'green' and less 'materialistic' politics. Inglehart's optimistic liberal evolutionism was repeated in an updated form by the pivotal Western European sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck from the late 1980s onward, and with an even stronger focus on the environmental aspect, with their theories on the rise of a 'risk society' and 'reflexive modernity' (Beck et al., 2003; Giddens, 1996). In their slipstream, measuring 'postmaterialist values' (and 'materialist values') proved a perfect fit for many large-*n* quantitative researchers, most notably in political science. When the emergence of green parties in Western Europe had to be accounted for somehow, the postmaterialist-evolutionist perspective became almost naturally accepted as the explanatory scheme (e.g. Kitschelt and Hellems, 1990; Müller-Rommel, 1990; cf. Van Haute, 2016). Still today, its categories guide many influential political value surveys and quantitative value research, such as the Chapel Hill Survey, the Eurobarometer, and Inglehart's World Value Survey, either in the form of the materialist/postmaterialist cleavage or a modification of it.<sup>20</sup>

Also on ecological topics in Central and Eastern Europe, after 1989, the liberal evolutionary perspective has provided much orientation. As we have seen, in the 1990s, Gawlik adhered to its premises, and its overall approach has dominated

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<sup>20</sup> The Chapel Hill Survey promotes using the VAR-TAN cleavage as more relevant party-political cleavage today: Green-Alternative-Liberal vs. Tradition-Authoritarian-Nationalist. This does hardly break radically with the postmaterialist/materialist scheme however – nor with its problems. Instead of preventing the observation of, for example, materialist-green positions, it instead obstructs the very relevant observations of a Tradition-Green-Alternative, or Liberal-Authoritarian-Nationalist position.

general conversation, directed policymaking, and inspired academic literature on environmental policymaking and green politics in the region (for green parties, e.g. in Frankland 2014, 2016; Rüdig 2006). From the assumed lack of attention over waste problems, to the underdevelopment of green parties, or lack of enthusiasm for environmental NGOs in the region, to Central Europe's deplorable reputation in climate negotiations, or problems with implementing EU environmental policy: they have predominantly been described, understood and analysed as indicators that CEE societies have not yet reached the right 'stage' for ecological values to flower. Normatively this implicitly entails, of course, that the region should advance further along the path of free market-steered modernization, to 'catch-up' with the assumedly more developed, efficient, and 'green' liberal capitalist economies *elsewhere*, in the *future*.

Such approaches went largely uncontested for most of the post-socialist period, but have started to lose much of their credibility since the financial crisis of 2008, the series of governmental debt crises in 2009, and the "crisis of liberalism" that ensued, not least in Central Europe. Today, when the topic of political attention for ecology and environment is discussed for the region, the liberal evolutionist scheme still tends to be taken for granted by many, but an insurmountable problem is that the future projected by this perspective, looking so inescapable and promising in 1989, never came true. Moreover, when multi-party democracy did seem to consolidate institutionally, and socio-economic conditions did improve in the later 1990s, at least in terms of GDP (ppp), political ecology groups and parties were *not* gradually receiving more backing but instead disintegrated. Even if there indeed appeared a Westernized, globalist, and postmaterialist hipster-class in the urban centres of Central and Eastern Europe, it can hardly be denied that ecological problems did not politicize, but rather de-politicized between their political heyday in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the 2008 financial crisis.

Although rarely discussed, an even more profound empirical problem is that *when* ecology in CEE politicized this did *not* happen, as is clear from the above section 3, under conditions of abundant consumerism and growing material welfare and stable liberal democratic institutions, like in Western Europe and the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As outlined above, ecology flowered politically in Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when socio-economic *insecurity* was at peak levels, whether in terms of GDP, state finance, or public confidence in the ruling political class (Ther, 2016, Ch. 2, Ch. 3, fig. 4.2, p. 101). It thus becomes difficult, if not simply impossible, to depict the depoliticisation and politicisation of ecology in accordance with liberal evolutionist theories, perspectives and categories.

When the story of WiP is recalled the problem becomes even clearer. Embracing Inglehart's postmaterialist scheme makes it impossible to appreciate the Polish wave of ecological activism during state socialism on its own terms. Giddens and Beck offer some more possibilities, but essentially their theories stumble upon similar problems. By far the most popular solution to the problem has been to side-line environmental activism during this period as somehow 'fake',

like a 'surrogate nationalism' for example, in the words of Jane Dawson over the Lithuanian environmental movements (Dawson, 1996). However, after closer inspection and actual dialogue with the actors, proper empirical substantiation for such judgement can only be fabricated with great difficulty, if at all. Within WiP's ranks, like in Lithuania, nationalist sentiments were certainly very present, but so were leanings toward liberalism, reform communism, and anarchism. While asking activists like Gawlik during this period, or even state-leaning geologists like Bleahu, it appears that their environmental engagement was overall marked by a *lack* of a clearly delineated ideological perspective, or an active denial of ideological perspective, with perhaps shared anti-establishment sensibility. Most importantly, it certainly comes across as rather authentic.

Even when pointing out the political opportunity provided by the environmental niche (cf. Oberschall, 1996), which was of course very real, and which Gawlik fully confirms for his own case, it makes little sense to dismiss 'proper' engagement with ecological questions on this basis, and call it a surrogate instead. One may recall how green politics in Western Europe emerged out of political opportunity too, most obviously in Germany (cf. Bütikofer, 2009, pp. 84-85; Probst, 2007). Perhaps most instructive: one should always remind oneself that practically no one was expecting the Iron Curtain to come down before it did, as the American historian Padraic Kenney has remarked (Kenney 2002, p. 145): even if environmental activism was somehow 'fake' before 1989, activists apparently preferred their 'masks', not thinking they could ever be removed. What are the fundamental differences in this regard, precisely, with those that identified with Paris '68 in the West? Both in East and West, young people with a leftist political education felt alienated from their official representatives in increasingly dogmatic and state-centred organizations, but were unable to find any common ground internally, before a gathering point was found when the ecological crisis came along (cf. Stavrakakis, 2000).

### **The alternative: critical and postcolonial theory**

Since 2008, political ecology is being understood in a range of different ways, in which the pivotal references are drawn from a wide range of different critical traditions: the Frankfurt School, critical realism, post- or neo-Marxist theory, discourse analysis in its different forms, or postcolonial theory.

Although this brings a much-needed improvement, if only because of the need for discussion, there too tend to emerge empirical problems from these perspectives. Let us take one of the most relevant and apt: the postcolonial paradigm. This perspective developed firstly in cultural historical and literary studies, strongly influenced by Foucaultian explorations of the culture-power nexus, and Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* (1978). For Central and Eastern Europe this new approach was first taken up by cultural historians that, in Said's slipstream, focused on how the region had been semi-orientalised in and by 'the West' as part of its continuous invention of itself since

Enlightenment (Todorova, 1997; Wolff, 1994). Until today, scholars influenced by postcolonial theory typically formulate what can be called an *externalisation-thesis*, pointing to a postcolonial problematic within Eastern Europe to 'locate goodness elsewhere', to use a phrasing of József Böröcz (2006).

An 'imagined West' is invoked both as 'sovereign and as sovereign measure' in moral geopolitics, but also from a frustrated location of the inadequate ('eastern' etc.) Europe. Goodness, just like 'life' in the title of Milan Kundera's novel, is imagined in Eastern Europe as being 'elsewhere' (pp. 133-34).

From the postcolonial point of view, such a tendency to externalise 'good things' from to the local here and now are linked to centuries of Ottoman, Russian, or German imperial domination, followed by Soviet repression, producing a political culture of popular disengagement, and a submissive ruling class accepting whichever regime manages to present itself as hegemonic. Often, as in Böröcz case, this is followed-up by drawing the local political class as alienated, anti-democratic and patronizing, and therefore after 1989 submissive to the Western-centrist 'moral geopolitics' of a quasi-colonialist ensemble of EU, IMF, large financial donors, and international NGOs. Such theories, then, resonate well with the leftist radical voices in Western Europe – Mouffe, Žižek, Rancière – pointing out that the post-communist political consensus, marked by the cross-party agreement on liberal modernization and 'transition' as described above, produced an undifferentiated political elite, and so worked to undermine real democracy with different and conflicting interests and viewpoints, even if it formally put multi-party systems in place. The strength of such perspectives derive in part from their lucid explanation of the rise of right-wing populism *within* the local here and now: 'good things' like environmental care, but also women's rights, LGBTQ+ equality, asylum policies, the Roma question, or, in Böröcz case, anti-racism, are not entirely without reason identified with an well-educated, liberal and upper-class elite that is democratic and participatory only in name. We barely must remark on the Fidesz government in Hungary or the PiS in Poland – or Trump and Brexit – to agree that we are trapped in an endless vicious circle.

As is clear from the Polish and Hungarian situation, the postcolonial point of view is ever more easily empirically substantiated nowadays relative to Inglehart, Beck or Giddens. Also with regards to political ecology it is not hard to find evidence on the flipside of the large sums from US and international donors becoming available for local 'civil society building' after 1989, later replaced by EU, Norwegian, and Swiss grants. Many of those around Gawlik and Bleahu started seeking "fundable causes", complying with lists of externally fixed requirements, and either losing or never developing incentives for involving with their everyday local human or non-human environment (cf. Fagan, 2006; Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013; Jancar-Webster, 1998; Lang, 2000). It stimulated processes of 'professionalization' and 'NGO-ization', i.e., a de facto political neutralization of civic environmental activism after 1989.

Scholars like Petr Jehlička or Zsuzsa Gille, meanwhile, have been influenced by postcolonial theory more explicitly in their attempts to destabilise what is generally assumed from the perspective of liberal modernisation and transition: the Western-oriented narrative on the 'grey Eastern bloc' and 'Cold War myths of ecocide, toxic nightmare and ecological disaster' (Jehlička, 2009, p. 102). They point out that nowadays trendy 'Western' and 'postmaterialist' local ecological practices, like city gardening or collectivist forestry for example, have in fact deeply rooted local anchors in Central and Eastern Europe, including in the socialist period, and have simply never disappeared, even while the region is still paradoxically overlooked 'a backward other in need of Western advice' (cit. Jehlička et al., 2015; Gille, 2007).

This, as mentioned, is in a marked improvement over the naive liberal transitology of the recent past. In view of the Chapter 3, however, there are several important remarks and side-notes to be made. First, it should be very clear that neither Gawlik nor Bleahu described their own (partial) adoption of the liberal environmentalist policy paradigm as taking place under a financial incentive, direct political pressure, or an articulated wish to become like 'the West'. Rather, when probed, they strongly protested such assumptions, and pointed instead to the moral, social, ecological and economic tensions in Romania and Poland in the 1980s. It is of course still possible to claim that they succumbed to Western neo-imperialist pressure, but simply not admit having done so. Some might claim that Bleahu and Gawlik have unconsciously been 'mimicking the West', to use Bhabha's postcolonial parlance (Bhabha, 1994). Such arguments can always be made, and provide for a comfortable and perhaps tempting critical superiority over actual actors, like Gawlik and Bleahu. The problem is that this comes at a heavy price: it grossly oversimplifies the complexity of their actual reality and daily decision-making, and runs the danger of cutting off levelled dialogue, if not grave insult, by literally subjecting them to a social theory. Note that, once more, actual environmental engagement is not an option here.

The attempt to take Bleahu and Gawlik seriously into account, pragmatically and radically empirically, also unveils a larger and partly political problem with the postcolonial perspective circling around, notably, Spivak's 'strategic essentialism', as a tool in the battle against Western hegemony (Spivak, 1988).<sup>21</sup> Cultural historians like Stanley Bill (2014) and Jan Sowa (2014) have drawn attention to a creative work-around of such postcolonial theoretical notions by radically conservative writers and intellectuals – they name the Polish-American scholar Ewa Thompson, the academic Dariusz Skórczewski, the author Rafał Ziemkiewicz, the poet Jarosław Rymkiewicz. Bill remarks that they use postcolonial theory not simply to identify and analyse but to pro-actively defend and construct nationalist 'necessary fictions' against 'neo-colonial

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<sup>21</sup> One of the most clear and well-known examples of such 'strategic essentialism' as a way to resist ruling hegemonies is the adoption of an Islamic heritage by Afro-Americans in the US: see Malcolm X and the history of the Nation of Islam in the US. In 2006 Spivak came to question Central European literary theorists: "Are you also postcolonial?" (Spivak et al. 2006).



oppression' – in the Polish case for example an historically entirely ridiculous glorifying narrative on the Sarmatian nobility, as the essence of Polish identity. Kaczyński's government in Poland, as well as movements further right such as Kukiz '15, are currently using such mythology to promote an agenda in favour of curbing parliament, undermining an independent judiciary, solidifying social inequalities, menacing the press, and limiting freedoms.

Of course, the engaged empirical work of Petr Jehlička, for one, is very far from proposing strategic essentialism along such lines. Nonetheless the warning of Bill and Chibber against abuse of the postcolonial perspective is a rather powerful one, and must be taken utterly seriously. Indeed, overly enthusiastic adoption of postcolonial theory may lead to empirical fallacies, such as blindness over honestly progressive attitudes and intentions of Gawlik and Bleahu, but is also politically problematic, as it tends to play an outright reactionary agenda, or because it for example obstructs collaboration with all those working in 'collaborative' NGOs, for example. Finally, there also is an obvious historical argument against all too direct translation of the postcolonial perspective to Central and Eastern Europe: it was never really colonized! As the Czech cultural critic Slačálek correctly remarked recently, the fundamental anxiety in Central Europe has never been to be dominated by enlightenment culture and the West but rather, and on the contrary, to be 'forgotten' by it:

The basic barrier [for transposing the postcolonial framework] is that the fundamental anxiety of Central European countries is not being colonized but fear of being expelled from the West and put on the same level as colonised countries. (Slačálek, 2016, p. 40)

### **Conclusion: post-Cold War political ecology**

To finally come to terms with the observed heyday of political ecology, then, this article proposes to appreciate the actual actors. It is not the time, as some say, to move toward a new Cold War between liberal modernization and postcolonial criticalism, almost 30 years after the former Cold War was overcome (cf. Latour, 2004a; 2011). What first must be done to evade this is to give up on platonic thinking on political ecology (or anything else for that matter) as something that must be grasped through one or the other singular ideo-theoretical perspective, historical scheme or pseudo-eternal Form, whether it be the liberal evolutionist 'Advanced Industrial Society' or a quasi-postcolonial celebration of 'ancient national culture'. The encounter with Gawlik and Bleahu makes precisely very clear how *any* theoretical vision acts itself, and does so to *obstruct* environmentalism: dogmatic adherence to any theory informs a high degree of closure for the actual environment in the broadest literal sense, with increasing tension with it as a result.

This is far removed from denying or disqualifying the usefulness ideational schemes or theoretical perspectives altogether, of course. Rather, with this approach, they sink 'deeper into the abstraction', as Latour has called it: they

become appreciated as the products of place-bound efforts to view and draw different things together, which then however start acting themselves. Once composed and drawn out, they provide for shared concepts and values, a degree of order, direction in view of chaos and catastrophe, and the very possibility of understanding the environment. In exchange they demand collective compliance, discipline and enforcement, an end to doubting and debating everything for its own sake, and thus a degree of neutralisation or depoliticisation, whether in the case of Marxist-Leninism, liberal modernist transitology, or postcolonial theory. Most dangerously, they tend to draw attention away from the directly experienced surroundings, and tend to being misunderstood as static or fixed blueprints for everyone and all situations.

Interestingly, the politicisation of ecology and environment becomes very well graspable from such an approach, with Central and Eastern Europe as a major case in point. Its history of political ecology, if taken seriously, first shows us the limitations of the liberal evolutionist and postcolonial perspectives. It requires us to face the radical place- and time-bound character of its theorization, and so forces a return to the daily experiences and an attention for the biophysical surroundings instead, of which theoretical schemes are attempting to make sense (Stengers, 2010, p. 32). Finally, and especially after considering its heyday in the absence of any dominant perspective for government, we cannot but admit that these schemes are themselves the political neutraliser, and vice versa, that the politicization of the environment is inversely related to the degree to which any theoretical perspective is successful in fixing, colonizing and finally neutralizing attention for environmental controversy.

One of the major advantages of this pragmatist approach is that, precisely because of its relativist, 'radically empirical' approach of ideo-theoretical perspectives as actors themselves, it enables a coherent and unifying narrative on political environmentalism that applies equally to Western and Eastern Europe. As this article shows, it was when the tension between actual reality and the theoretical schemes of Marxist-Leninism became untenable that the environment politicized – indeed as a tautology. In Western Europe, also, scientific ecology first politicised during high tension between the ruling ideological perspectives and actual reality at the end of the 1960s onwards into the 1970s. Like in Central Europe, it was first picked up by groups outside of the ruling political classes, after which the scientific necessity associated with biophysical materiality assisted in catapulting them into the parliamentary political establishment, as the seated establishment perceived a growing need to take its environment into account.

Like in Eastern Europe, neoclassical free market economic theory then became a dominant template for refreshing intra-elite consensus, and provided a new perspective and direction to policymakers, after state-centred governmentality had disintegrated. Like in Central and Eastern Europe, this resulted in the development of an interconnected package of liberal environmental policy. Swayed by the promise of incorporating environmental 'externalities' into a rational market-ruled system, the administrative managerial systems that

started putting it into practice effectively managed to ‘colonize’ and depoliticize the environment in the 1990s and 2000s (cf. Swyngedouw, 2007). Along the way, movements ‘NGO-ized’ while Western European green parties, in this case unlike their Central and Eastern European counterparts, continued to have parliamentary presence, but distanced themselves from their radical past. The most influential and telling was undoubtedly the defeat of the *Fundis* in the West-German *Die Grünen*, followed by a wave of ‘professionalisation’ in the party (Klein and Alzheimer, 1997).

Finally, it is only since the 2008 financial crisis hit and former securities are again in question that ecological issues have started to regain their former political urgency. Once again ‘the environment’ is less and less understood as a manageable biophysical niche, and more and more like a difficult intertwined socio-political matter. Movements take other forms than in the 1980s – and are strikingly often at odds with, independent from, or active ‘below’ or ‘aside’ established environmental NGOs or green political parties (cf. Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013). Along these lines, even some good old-fashioned predictions about the future can be made. The new heyday for political ecology in Central Eastern Europe, as much as anywhere else, will not come about semi-automatically after arriving at a more ‘developed stage’ along the lines of liberal modernization theory. Neither will it be part of recovering some imagined lost purity as a ‘necessarily fiction’, along the lines of postcolonial theory. First, properly political environmentalism worthy of the name will only come to pass when it manages to cast such theoretical perspectives in doubt. Second, it will only maintain its “politicality” if it manages to prevent such doubt becoming as total as in 1989, only to then adhere to yet another set of ideo-theoretic resolutions...

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