

Discussion Note

Legitim Political Freedom: A New Environmental Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

In our modern societies it is often emphasized that citizens have both rights and duties towards each other. Individual actors are given the opportunity to pursue their individual interests as long as they do not obviously inflict harm on others. Today, however, it has become clear that the opportunities that our liberal democracies make available for individual actors have led to major collective disadvantages: class divisions, poverty and environmental problems worldwide.

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LIBERALISM IS OUT OF DATE

In our modern societies it is often emphasized that citizens have both rights and duties towards each other. Individual actors are given the opportunity to pursue their individual interests as long as they do not obviously inflict harm on others. Today, however, it has become clear that the opportunities that our liberal democracies make available for individual actors have led to major collective disadvantages: class divisions, poverty and environmental problems worldwide. To the best of our knowledge, our consumer societies have been continuously reducing the remaining natural area, in favor of new buildings, infrastructure, industrial products and their waste. The deterioration of the planet's ecosystems has not only led to an extreme species death in the animal and plant world, but also to a high risk of ecological collapse.

If we are to regard ourselves as rational and moral agents, we should relieve our nature, the basis of our life, at least to the extent that its persistence becomes likely. This goal could be achieved by limiting our ecological footprint (according to current calculations for sustainable ecosystems) to an absolute budget. Based on this budget, all countries should be allocated a capped carbon emission quota (according to their population), which is then shared equally between the citizens. Since any form of environmental pollution (ecological footprint) can be converted into CO2 equivalents, setting an absolute CO2 emission budget is not only possible, but without any alternative.

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RIGHTS AND PREFERENCES

In order to ensure stability and growth in the state, as early as 1651, *Thomas Hobbes* rationally justified why people living in societies should accept a social contract; most people are afraid of anarchy and prefer the security a state can offer. Laws and regulations as well as civil rights and duties have since changed continuously, in line with the compromises that the various sections of society have negotiated at any given time. Today's most developed welfare states have increased their service offerings so extensively that they finally got people providers, meanwhile citizens got service recipients.

However, our welfare societies lack a sustainable foundation since the service offerings are based on an economy that generates from unlimited access to production and consumption. When it is undisputed that our economy is directly linked to a continuous reduction of natural resources and ecosystems, our current social contract becomes illegitimate. Established legislation should admittedly limit various irregularities (for example laws in favor of a certain nature conservation), but in the absence of a focus on specific over-consumption, we will never reach the decisive goal. To avoid a weak economy, nation states are not even interested in calculating a sustainable limit of our consumption. Leading politicians rarely look beyond their term of office and in favor to stay popular.

Regardless of nature's ecosystems, Eastern European communists for 40 years sought to limit human urge for boundless unfoldment. The ideology of owning and managing means of production together should lead to an ideal society, without class divisions. However, people could not be left behind unmotivated for realizing their own ideas. When Communism capitulated in 1989,

Margaret Thatcher seized the opportunity to proclaim the final victory of liberalism. Her TINA principle "There Is No Alternative" has since, unfortunately, become a recognized paradigm.

In the Western world, we today perceive ourselves as free and enlightened people. However, which freedom we enjoy and which we are entitled to is very diffuse. As preference-driven hedonists, surrounded by ever-changing products, conventions and competing demands, we must balance family, work, friends and ourselves. Walking this tightrope, we rarely consider our (common) environment to be more important than our (individual) needs – when push comes to shove.

Despite all the environmental measures, we still release more CO₂ into the atmosphere every year than the year before. A known fact can obviously be so unpleasant for us that we push it aside, so that it no longer bothers us or finds its way into our logical thought processes. To avoid stress, evolution has shaped us to suppress negative mindsets, especially when they compete with each other that seem more useful to us in the short term. Psychologists describe this well-known effect as dissonant behavior.

We have a hard time blaming ourselves; after all, our social contract is continuously adjusted on democratic basis. However, the question of whether we were ever ready enough for democracy, can be raised. In his latest book, *Francis Fukuyama* said that the spirit of the world and our democracy have ended up in an identity crisis, split into a multitude of different interest groups. He sees our immaturity today as a by-product of our liberal democracy; we have been infantilized and depoliticized. Our desired medicine (democracy) has made us sick (immature).

THE PRECAUTION PRINCIPLE

At all times, we have the political responsibility to define the knowledge that our society should be dominated by. Based on our environmental problems, we must, enlightened and pragmatic, put a new concept of formation to the forefront. A sustainable basis for the planet's ecosystems must come into play now.

Olaf L. Müller, German professor of philosophy from Humboldt University in Berlin, presented in 2009 a brilliant idea with the potential to minimize the world's climate and pollution risk. He pleads for "a sin account for all" with a free allocation of individual climate quotas. In such a system, CO₂ becomes an overriding currency that will move human consumption to a justifiable level. Since we don't know when we cross the threshold of an impending (and not reversible) disaster scenario, we should, based on the precautionary principle, enter into a new social contract. In this, we commit ourselves to limit the planet's maximum advisable CO₂ emissions via climate quotas, distributed equally among all people in the world. Internal purchases and sales on an individual basis would be possible since the total amount of CO₂ allowances will not increase in this model. The idea of individual climate quotas is radical, but gives us a concrete and targeted proposal for a new environmental paradigm: If we accept the logic of mathematics, there must be a concrete sum X that determines the maximum CO₂ emissions we can afford to emit in relation to the planet's ecosystems. According to current calculations, this limit corresponds to an emission of approx. 2 tons of CO₂ per person and year (which would be at least four times less than many of us are used to). We can of course hope that the current calculations made by our best scientists from the international panel of climate change are too careful, but as long as we don't get an updated

information, we need to accept the actual measurements.

Right now, there is no legitimate argument that supports a higher average consumption, at least not in our western part of our world. Developing countries can thus argue that they have only to a small extent contributed to CO₂ emissions since the industrial revolution began in the West, and that they will therefore reserve the right to more emissions in the years ahead. This is understandable, but does not lead anywhere in terms of daily ongoing environmental degradation worldwide (especially in developing countries). There is no time to discuss historical justice as our ecosystems are tipping. In purely rational terms, today we should acknowledge a revised TINA principle: the footprint we leave behind must remain below the planet's sustainability limit; There is no alternative.

Should the population worldwide increase in the future, our individual climate quotas would automatically be reduced accordingly, it is simple mathematics. We know that population growth and poverty are linked. Our self-interest in development aid (education, poverty reduction, etc.) would therefore even increase in the future(!)

RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION

In our modern societies, we value security, medical care, education, infrastructure, etc. In order to keep the state with its political institutions functional, we must necessarily leave some of our available resources (as a tax) to our public systems. But how much of our individual quota would we be willing to set aside for the benefit of our society (including social institutions)? A well-staffed public sector requires resources that automatically eat up a huge part of our total quota. Since the sum of the total

national CO₂ quota may not be exceeded, we would need to select or deselect public measures and welfare systems on a new basis, still democratic, but much more committed. Supposedly, most of us would not any longer accept resource intensive science projects, for example geoengineering or space travel, as this does not concern us directly. Rationally, we want to keep as much prosperity as possible for ourselves, here and now. If the framework of available resources is physically given, no one can bring phantom resources into the environmental debate (such as money). We can look forward to the public distribution debates, a more exciting democracy would be hard to imagine!

SELECTIVE ATTENTION

Today's debates about environmental pollution often focus selectively into certain directions; for example, the impact of the transport industry (air traffic, cruise and container ships, trucks, cars), the energy industry (oil, gas production, wind farms), food production (deforestation, depletion of soils and seeds, chemicals). We also like to point out moral problems inherent in global commodity production (genetic engineering, animal cruelty, child and modern slave labor). However, we can save ourselves from attacking certain industries. The struggles with the lobbyists and their good lawyers would in any case take far too long in relation to our conservative legislation. In addition, we lack a moral guideline for distributing necessary cuts between industries, looking for associated jobs, etc. Ultimately, we are the buyers of the industry's products and will never be able to act neutrally in this debate. Our consumption patterns change in step with the industry's product strategies. We are often fooled into buying so-called environment-friendly products, but do not see the whole picture: Which electric car

buyer really cares to look at the total footprint of his car? The extraction of the natural resources required for production (like rare metals) and the later scrapping (especially of the battery) put a greater strain on nature than cars with combustion engines do. New rules and laws to curb unfortunate external effects always lag behind. In the meantime, we have once again increased our ecological footprint. The carousel only rotates from one spin to the next, in step with changing fashions or our attention at a given moment. We can save ourselves all the hassle of getting "greener" by buying new technical equipment, the effort ultimately works against its purpose, because our illusion of temporary good conscience only prolongs the injury process, we are in.

INDIVIDUAL CO₂ QUOTAS

Our dilemma will resolve itself once we recognize our legitimate consumption quotas. Say that we have 1.5 tons of CO₂ available per capita and year (after we have democratically decided what share we are willing to set aside for the state apparatus, for example 0.5 tons). From now on we would (individually rationally) preferably buy goods that have a low ecological footprint. It should be completely unproblematic to integrate the footprint into the barcode of any industrially produced commodity. The distribution of products without marked footprint would no longer be allowed. Payment would have to be made with our personal bank card (or cash, with our ID card) so that our consumption / footprint could be collected in our own CO₂ account. Our energy and fuel consumption could also be easily converted to CO₂ equivalents. Larger investments (for example construction or purchase of a house) should be able to be amortized over several years (and persons) and in the event of resale, the remaining quota could be transferred to the new buyer. For the

sake of fair rules, we should vote for the best possible CO₂ calculations, systematically controlled by the state. Even the energy from the wood we burn in the fireplace in our house could be measured with a mandatory heat sensor mounted on top of the chimney. This proposal was actually put forward in Denmark recently (of tax reasons). So, what about the cozy fire we enjoy after sawing off few branches in our garden? - let go. Not everything can and should be measured. It is enough to record our industrial CO₂ consumption to achieve our goal. Only when every purchase has an impact on our personal CO₂ account, we would select products that have not been shipped over long distances or resource-intensively manufactured. We would probably have our own vegetable gardens and orchards again, or maybe even go fishing. Great!

SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

Goods or services that we do not really need, would probably disappear from the market. Our sharpened understanding of the production cost would measure the value of the product no longer just with money, but mainly with CO₂. Based on our limited consumption quotas many existing jobs would of course disappear. However, high purchasing power would in any case be less important. Wealthy people would certainly buy carbon quotas to at least partially maintain their habitual consumption, but neighbors and society in general would likely see them as somewhat immoral. Who would then, still proudly, want to park two big SUVs in front of his house? The new environmental paradigm of equal CO₂ quotas would change our mentality. We would take care of the things we already own as much as possible and otherwise only buy what we wanted and could afford in terms of our carbon account. Private companies would have to completely

rethink their production in line with our realigned demand. New, local businesses would emerge on a large scale as the transportation advantage will bring win-win situations for nearby consumers.

For the system to work, future commodity production in the private sector must underlie a new premise: the owners (shareholders) of a company must bear the risk of the CO₂ costs of the entire production line. An example: Let us assume that a factory has a total footprint of 10,000 tons of CO₂ (including building construction, machines, company vehicles, raw material, energy, transport, etc.). Let us further assume that the production consists of 100,000 goods so that the footprint per product corresponds to 0.1 ton. If all goods are sold, the CO₂ account of the company would go back to zero (all CO₂ units of the sold goods move to the accounts of the buyers) -which confirms that the production in fact was sustainable. The products that are thrown on the market must be so good that people buy them despite their limited CO₂ quotas. However, if the company wouldn't sell all the goods, the owners will be left with a negative CO₂ share (on their company shares) - and will thus be in debt to society. If only 95,000 goods would be sold, 5,000 will be left in a warehouse. The leftover goods cannot be given away for free either, unless some people are willing to strain their individual CO₂ accounts by receiving these goods(!) The negative CO₂ balance from the company will thus be $5,000 \times 0.1 = 500$ tons of CO₂. Let us assume that the company is divided into 10,000 shares (ownership interests). In our example, each share will then have a negative balance of $500 : 10,000 = 0.05$ tons. It would be rational to demand that shareholders equalize their negative balance sheets from their private CO₂ accounts. This may sound brutal and unfair, but who else would make up for the

environmental degradation caused by the production of the remaining 5,000 items? Environmental economists have argued for many years that no one is making up for the diffuse, negative external effects from our global trade. My suggestion here solves this problem. We can easily imagine that companies will henceforth think twice before launching new products on the market. If so, it would be very environment-friendly products, adapted to our new preferences.

Back to our personal consumption: once we have recognized our legitimate CO2 quota, we will, for the sake of our CO2 account, completely voluntarily, cut down resource-intensive activities (like motorsports, flights, cruise boats, construction and heating of large houses and cottages, driving cars, buying meat or long-distance goods, etc.). We would prefer to live close to our workplace so that we can take the bus or the bike more easily. It wouldn't bother us to see our neighbor drive past us with his car, even if it rains, because we know we are getting something in return to our effort. In nowadays rules it has no practical significance if we leave the car - while the world otherwise does business as usual. Of course, we can be idealists or martyrs, but how many of us will try to defy the crowd until it (maybe) follows us on a beautiful day? No one wants to be the stupid one. It's also not really motivating to aim for a common goal before most people agree.

FREEDOM VS. CEILING

It may sound strange, but an equal consumption budget for everyone actually protects our freedom to the *maximum*. As it is well known for communities, everyone's political freedom ends exactly where the freedom of any other member begins. Based on the principle of equality, we therefore must recognize our share of the common good. Great philosophers like

Kant or *John Rawls* explained to us perfectly the need to restrict political freedom in the social collective. In our globalized world equal distribution of our commons would mean that everyone would have to accept his CO2 budget. People can heat their house or drive their car, but, for the sake of justice, only according to their budget. We will naturally reshuffle our individual priorities and preferences, and each of us will still be able to do it in his or her own way. We remain hedonists, but must adhere to a given environmental framework. Those who demand a higher CO2 quota for themselves must make themselves aware that they exceed the collective average limit (because someone else then necessarily gets less). It is conceivable that the welfare service of the state has room to grant the most disadvantaged a higher CO2 quota. This may, for example, apply to people who are ill and need special treatment for various reasons. Here, just as before, public funds will be democratically allocated in order to maintain a social society, as we want it. We will continue to pay attention to the most disadvantaged, but our morals must be compatible with our environmental framework. Our new overarching goal (emissions goal, consumption goal, fairness goal) will ensure that we can no longer dispose of illegitimate natural resources. We will, of course, reshuffle our individual priorities and preferences. Who would still take the plane for his summer holiday if his annual quota then would go down by 50%? Anyone demanding a higher CO2 quota for himself must be aware that he is exceeding the collective average limit (because then someone else would necessarily get less). If we wanted to help disadvantaged people more than the state could offer, we would need to give them a part from our own budget or vote for more social distribution at next elections. However, our

overarching goal must be to ensure that we no longer have illegitimate natural resources at our disposal.

WHICH COUNTRY SHOULD START?

In relation to its population, Norway has a huge access to fossil energy resources (oil, gas), but would in fact be able to cope well with existing (sustainable) hydropower. Without using much of their emission quotas, the Norwegians would be able to heat their houses or even charge their electric cars. No country in the world could initiate a sustainable environmental policy more easily than Norway. That gives Norway an extraordinary responsibility to open the door into this new paradigm. Norway would then surely stop selling its hydropower to Germany (which only wants to embellish its green energy and CO2 statistics) in order to rebuy dirty coal power from Germany at the same time.

However, it would make little sense if Norway decided to adhere to its legitimate emission quota alone. If we look at the moral change regarding future environmental problems among the young generations, there is hope of receiving support from Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands and perhaps Germany (at least the debates are constantly on). These or other EU countries should consider entering into an agreement on an absolute emission limit (according to the number of their population) as soon as possible.

Let's do a little thought experiment across the western world: What about populous developing countries such as Ethiopia or Bangladesh. Would they, in a real democratic election, agree to such a CO2 policy? Wouldn't they be very interested because their average consumption only corresponds to approx. 0.7 tons of CO2 (the poorest of them probably even less - and that is many hundreds of millions of people)? If all these people had been

allocated a free quota of 2 tons of CO2 annually, they would in fact receive a natural citizen's wage because they would be able to sell parts of their emission quota to rich consumers in the West. Since wealthy people want to maintain a high standard of living, they would be willing to pay well for extra CO2 quota units (quota prices and their development may be interesting, but it does not really matter to reach our goal).

Quota purchases would not be immoral, but could be seen as modern development aid. The money transfer could also be seen as a compensation for previous historical injustice that has arisen amongst developed and developing countries. Quota trading between individuals should not be confused with the "grandfathering" model that was staged so far. The later model was based on the fact, that the largest industrial pollutants were allocated free CO2 certificates(!) which they would then be allowed to sell in part if they improved their emissions. In the absence of a closed system, this whole quota trade unfortunately turned into a sham. It is impossible to set an authentic market price for carbon emissions as long as our total consumption exceeds the planet's sustainability. If the central bank prints more and more banknotes, it will eventually lead to price inflation with a subsequent economic catastrophe. If we distribute phantom CO2 certificates (allowances of pollution) it will lead to an environmental catastrophe.

Postponing to set a budget of sustainable CO2 emission quotas (to the populations of each country) will only lead to even greater problems tomorrow. Countries that do not commit to a specific "emissions agreement" should be asked for an official reason. Meanwhile they should get categorically excluded as trading partners, even if that would give worse economies on both sides. We are not in a war situation, but we are still in

the middle of an extreme situation where sustainable rationing of natural resources is the key into our future. We would have to accept that we will only be able to consume products that can be manufactured in our own country or in countries that are bound by the same agreement. Most countries would probably argue that such an emission budget will be too demanding for them. We can then only refer to the *new* TINA principle; There Is No Alternative (doing it differently). If a country really began to commit to its legitimate emissions quotas, signaling and spiraling effects would most likely ignite the debate across all the world's news channels. People would then, to a much greater extent, reflect on their actions and ongoing justifications.

COURAGE FOR GOALS

The ecosystems of our forests, landscapes, rivers and oceans should serve as the common good for everybody. The problem is that our liberal democracies do nothing to limit or even counter our consumption. The environmental protection that we practice has no absolute goal and therefore only leads us to lose valuable time. It is of little use to selectively protect individual parts of nature, while the sum of the remaining ecosystems is getting smaller every year. Our engineers and scientists are unable to specify the “real transmitters” of all diffuse emissions that our industrial products leave behind. Meanwhile our pollution accumulates on and around our planet. However, by (re)calculating all our industrial recovery of natural resources, manufacture and transport into CO₂ equivalents, we can easily gain the ecological footprint of all industrial products that we consume. Once all industrial products are marked, every consumer would know exactly how to choose among them.

In a world of eight billion people, it must be clear that we cannot use our natural resources without a certain limit. Once we recognize that this limit exists (and demand it politically) we at least steer towards a legitimate goal. Measuring our personal footprint would be a necessary evil, but essential for a fair distribution of our available resources. This is the only way we can save our vulnerable world for us and our future generations.

17-year-old *Greta Thunberg* from Sweden represents our next generation. Her clairvoyance and courage made us aware of our lethargy towards the ongoing ecological catastrophe and set in motion climate demonstrations in many countries. With her simple question, how to explain our lack of ecological responsibility to our children, she hit our Achilles heel. In fact, our politicians have no sensible answer to her. According to *Hegel*, all our actions steer towards a historical truth. Perhaps our time has been waiting for *Greta* and her actions to usher in the new paradigm shift we are now ready for. Our goal must be to live in a better world, as equally free people, at least politically. *Pericles* said 2,500 years ago that courage is the key into our freedom. In contrast to antiquity, our modern democracies have been most concerned with the division between rights and duties. What they did not do, was cultivating courage as an important virtue. However, today we just need the courage to take drastic steps. We have to free ourselves collectively from the environmental crisis we have ended up in. We have to recognize our rights and duties on the basis of a new paradigm.

There is no alternative.