



LÜTZERATH: TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS VERSUS GREEN REALISM

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Lützerath will remain.¹ Even if the coal is eventually extracted, the name of the place will continue to be a powerful symbol of the courage and ingenuity of people who resist both a powerful corporation and the power of the state. Lützerath is also a symbol of a policy that fails to recognize the signs of the times: the phasing-out of coal and the transition to a mode of production in which the good life for all, rather than the defense of powerful particular interests, is the central point of reference.

Responsible for the failed policy is the so-called “traffic light” coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD, red), the Liberals (FDP, yellow), and the Greens, which has been governing Germany since the end of 2021. Together with the government of North Rhine-Westphalia, formed by the Christian Democrats and the Greens, they made a deal with the German energy company RWE. The latter would be allowed to destroy Lützerath, situated in the Rhenish brown coalfield, in order to extract the lignite stored underneath the village. In exchange, the company would abandon its plan to destroy five further villages in the region and commit to phasing out coal by 2030, i.e., eight years earlier than envisioned in the so-called “coal compromise” concluded between the German state, the federal states, and the energy companies in 2020.

Until the very last moment, a broad coalition of movements—ranging from Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, the Last Generation, and “Ende Gelände” to a local protest alliance, church groups, the Left party, and the Greens’ youth organization—tried to prevent the destruction of Lützerath. Climate activists squatted in the houses left behind after the original owners were dispossessed and relocated. With enormous creative energy, they constructed a protest infrastructure and trained people in civil disobedience. Many protesters held out in a camp near the village, wintry weather notwithstanding. Finally, on January 14, a rainy and stormy winter day, around 35,000 people gathered for a large demonstration on the muddy fields around Lützerath that featured an address by Greta Thunberg. On this day, the police violence escalated, leaving many people injured.

The Greens, in particular, must acknowledge the legitimate indignation of the protesters: no sooner did they become a governing party at federal level for the second time since 1998 than they recommenced making policy against the very movements from which they themselves had emerged. The first time, the peace movement led the turn against the Greens after their then-leader Joseph Fischer, the foreign minister of the red-green

¹ This is a translated and extended version of our article “Lützerath als Fanal. Warum wir transformative Strategien im Kampf gegen die Klimakrise brauchen,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 2/2023.

government, supported German participation in NATO's war in Kosovo. Today, the Greens are disappointing the climate movement, to the strength of which they owe their recent electoral successes.

Green “Sense of Reality”

Certainly, no one expected the Greens' participation in government to bring about a social-ecological revolution. After all, the Greens are part of a coalition in which the anti-environmental FDP has considerable power. Moreover, there is no question that state policy follows a logic different from the actions of social movements. The state is not an instrument that can simply be put at the service of fundamental social change. Rather, the possibilities of state policy are systematically constrained by the prevailing social relations. These relations are, so to speak, inscribed in the state apparatus: they shape the thinking of its personnel and determine which problems can be discussed at all and in what form.

The “march through the institutions” envisaged by the 1968ers resulted in the march of the institutions through the protagonists of the movement. This was the Greens' experience of their first participation in federal government between 1998 and 2005: faster than they would have liked, and mostly without realizing it, the Green leaders internalized the institutional restrictions and misunderstood this as an arrival on the hard ground of reality. In fact, it was only the reality of the ruling class, which they had previously criticized and now wanted to help shape.

The failure of today's leading Greens is that they have not reflected on this experience. Instead, they ran blindly and unprepared into a situation in which they would eventually have to give a quasi-“free pass” to one of the world's biggest polluters as part of a climate policy compromise.

RWE will probably be rubbing its hands with glee at such green realism for some time to come. Even as the climate crisis escalates, the company will be allowed to mine and burn another 280 million tonnes of lignite. In 2030, it will be able to let go of the hot air and scorched earth—and rest assured that by then, the increased prices for certificates from the European emissions trading scheme will have made coal-fired power generation unprofitable anyway. On top of this, the company gets to destroy an important infrastructure of the climate justice movement, which would have caused it a lot of trouble in the years to come. The squatted Lützerath was a place where people came together for action trainings, workshops and festivals.

Now, it could be argued that the government preceding the current “traffic light” coalition—led by the Christian Democrats with the Social Democrats as a junior partner—systematically slowed down the energy transition and thus created the constraints with which the current government is now confronted. Furthermore, without the Greens in government, the situation would arguably be even worse, since this party pursues the most ecological agenda of the three coalition partners. Finally, one could contend that the current government is not to blame for the rise in gas prices following the Russian attack on Ukraine and the subsequent revival of coal for the purpose of “energy security.”

That is true, but it misses the point. First, the simple fact is that the mining of coal under Lützerath is not necessary to energy security and network stability. This is the conclusion drawn by several expert reports, including those by the [FossilExit Research Group](#) and [Aurora Energy Research](#). Second, it is not necessarily desirable to secure sufficient supply to meet the existing purposes.

Why Social Movements Are Needed

Even if the coal were needed to meet the existing demand for electricity, it would be ecologically obvious to question this demand before emitting even more CO₂ to meet it. Do we need electricity for car factories to

produce huge quantities of ever-larger vehicles, which, once released from their factories, either consume huge quantities of electricity or convert the fossil fuels themselves into carbon dioxide? Do we need energy with which for the chemical industry to produce mountains of plastic packaging that is, after a single use, incinerated or exported abroad? This is security of supply for a mode of production and living that is already plunging countless people into existential insecurity.

It would be much more sensible—and, in view of the growing and worsening crises, it is urgent—to pause and ask what things are socially necessary and can be produced in a way that does not further heat up the earth and destroy the livelihoods of people in this country and elsewhere, both now and in the future: a sustainable mobility system, a well-developed health system that is accessible to all, energy-efficient and affordable housing, and an education system that compensates for differences of origin instead of reproducing them.

Of course, there is plenty of money for this. Society is richer than it has ever been. Those who can afford to spend hundreds of billions of euros on the Bundeswehr (the German federal armed forces) or bailing out the banks also have the resources to make society fit for the future. Why should we continue to waste resources and human creativity on developing new financial instruments, designing SUVs, and optimizing weapons systems? Why not instead put the social effort, the practical and collective intelligence of workers, the creativity of engineers at the service of a good life for all?

Such questions can hardly be discussed in parliaments and ministries. This should come as no surprise, since they go to the heart of the capitalist mode of production: the possibility of using private ownership of the means of production to the detriment of the general public as long as profits, growth, and tax revenues result. This is couched in terms of "competitiveness," with reference to jobs or the argument that "the Chinese" are the problem when it comes to addressing climate change and that Europe has already done its part. But these are smoke bombs that only serve to obscure the real problem.

This is why we need radical social movements like the climate justice movement that has been fighting in Lützerath and elsewhere. They shake up apparent certainties; they make visible concerns that are not, or not sufficiently, represented in the state apparatus; and they reveal apparently natural realities for what they really are: the coagulated results of earlier social conflicts, often in the form of the generalization of powerful particular interests.

Understanding the hard realities that the Greens now take for granted as historical—that is, as shaped by powerful interests—and refusing to accept the logic of constraints means revealing the often-buried possibility of change and making clear that everything could be different. This is what makes radical social movements so dangerous to the ruling class and explains the repression they face. But it is also what makes them so important, because they shift the horizon of what can be thought and said. They open up a space of possibility that is systematically closed to state policy under capitalism alone.

Transformative Strategies

In order to secure what has been achieved and to make successes effective, however, stakes have to be driven in somewhere. Changes need to be enshrined in law, secured against regression, and designed to withstand foreseeable attacks. This is a difficulty that has led to the failure of many progressive movements. They create a spirit of optimism, point to possible alternatives, shift public debates, and have a politicizing effect on younger generations. But without tangible social changes, such as an end to the burning of fossil fuels, a ban on industrialized meat production or an ambitious dismantling of the car system, there is a risk of frustration.

Another danger is that while movements may initially fight against repression and prevailing opinion, in the medium and long term they risk being co-opted. Repression can strengthen movements by raising awareness of their concerns, notwithstanding the danger to life and limb. By contrast, cooptation often means the creeping end.

Like their economic base, capitalism, liberal democracies thrive on change. They reproduce themselves by constantly reinventing themselves. Social movements are seismographs of a need for action, but this can also be captured politically and not infrequently translated into new business opportunities. The result is what Antonio Gramsci called "passive revolution": the stabilization of existing conditions through their change, steered by the dominant interest groups.

Again, this is not a law of nature, but a tendency inscribed in the functioning of liberal-democratic capitalist societies. The first step is to be aware of it. After that, it is important to deal with this tendency in a critical and reflective way. This applies both to radical social movements and to progressive actors in the state apparatus. Both face the challenge of developing transformative strategies and supporting each other in the process.

In contrast to modernizing-affirmative strategies, transformative strategies are characterized by resisting cooptation and making successes visible. They design concrete reforms in such a way as to make fundamental changes apparent and, ideally, set in motion dynamics that are beyond the control of those in power.

Emancipatory state and party-political actors who are genuinely concerned with far-reaching transformations should be aware of the tension in which they necessarily operate, namely doing politics within and at the same time against the institutions of the capitalist state. Emancipatory politics can move successfully in this contradiction if it also sees itself as an institutional sounding board for social movements. Governments and parties committed to fundamental change must not only represent movements, but also contribute to the empowerment thereof. This is the only way to create a dynamic that goes beyond the structural limits of the capitalist state and makes it possible to secure the gains for which the movements have fought.

The Greens have failed to do this. They are, as it were, operating on a half-hearted basis: they draw strength (in the form of votes) from the self-empowerment of the climate justice movement, but they give nothing back to the movement, leaving it in the mud of Lützerath to face state repression, which—to complete the symbolism of the struggles—is orchestrated by a Green police chief.

While the movement has emerged at least symbolically victorious so far, the Greens, [as Mona Jaeger speculated](#) in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on January 15, could experience their “Hartz IV moment”—the core of the neoliberal social and labor-market changes in Germany—with the eviction of Lützerath. Just as the SPD squandered years of credibility in social and labor-market policy with its workfare turn and the introduction of the Social Code II in 2005 (of which Hartz IV was a part), the Greens are about to squander the last vestige of credit that the climate justice movement might have granted them. In the firm belief that they are standing on the hard ground of reality, they are making a veritable belly flop on a muddy field in the Rhineland.

What Will Happen in and after Lützerath?

There are many examples that show that transformative politics is possible—and how it can be done. A current example in Germany is “Expropriate *Deutsche Wohnen*” (DWE), a housing movement that initiated a successful referendum to expropriate *Deutsche Wohnen* and other large real estate companies in Berlin. Doing so could contribute to improving the housing conditions of many people. At the same time, it would concretely challenge a structural principle of capitalist society, namely the private disposal of basic infrastructure. The latter, in this

case housing, would be removed from the logic of profit and its use value strengthened. A similar approach could be taken with other types of infrastructure. Socialization is also being discussed in the energy sector; in the water sector, formerly privatized companies have been returned to municipalities in many places.

In all these cases, the initiative came from extra-parliamentary movements, which in turn benefitted from their interactions—never free of conflict—with left-wing actors in the state apparatus. In the case of DWE, it is unclear whether this link will hold. Much will depend on the work of an expert commission that was set up by the Senate after the successful referendum in order to review the legal viability of an expropriation.²

What can be learned from this for Lützerath, and how can significant changes still be initiated? [A moratorium](#) on the further extraction of coal would be an important first step, similar to the one suggested by more than 700 scientists on January 11. Their idea was to stop the destruction of Lützerath and "to provide an opportunity for a transparent dialogue process with all stakeholders to develop sustainable ways of transforming society and time to review the underlying decision-making premises."

A moratorium would not be transformative *per se*, but it could be filled in a transformative sense if the “how much” and “for what” questions facing social (energy) production were discussed. The climate crisis and the war on Ukraine make clear that we must fundamentally change our deeply unsustainable ways of producing and using energy. This implies a dismantling of motorized individual transport and industrial agriculture, but also a rethinking of the supposed “silver bullet” of digitalization, which is becoming ever more energy-intensive. These questions are also posed directly or indirectly in "Lützerath"—and they require a sustainable answer that expresses solidarity with the rest of the globe.

² Politically, the prospects of expropriation have deteriorated since the repetition of the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives. Instead of the former red-red-green coalition between the Social Democrats, the Left, and the Greens, a black-red alliance between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats is going to govern Berlin. The Christian Democrats have fought the expropriation from the beginning, as has the right wing of the Social Democrats, led by the city's former mayor, Franziska Giffey.