In search of the future

Green political thought in the German-speaking world

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Summary

Since the 1970s and the perception of a global ecological crisis as an existential challenge for human societies, green political thought has expanded the traditional spectrum of political thought. Alarmed by the diagnosis of the finiteness of and the threat to the natural livelihoods, it reconsiders the state, the economy, culture and thus society in general. It combines the ecologically motivated critique of existing social structures with the development of alternative approaches. This strand of political thinking is the subject of the book, which focuses on five research questions:

1. Which relevant responses has green political thought produced?
2. Which basic positions can be differentiated in the landscape of green political thought?
3. What are the central dividing lines along which the spectrum of green political thought fans out?
4. How do green political thought and the spectrum of divergent positions change over time?
5. To what divergent background assumptions can the competing positions and thus the heterogeneity of green political thought be traced?

To answer these questions, the book examines green political thought during two selected periods: the first heyday in the 1970s and early 1980s following the Club of Rome report on the limits to growth, and the more recent discourse since the late 2000s. In each case, the most important basic positions are reconstructed and interpreted, whereby the focus lies on the most relevant thought leaders and their works.

The results show that green political thought constitutes a very heterogeneous landscape of thought. In both periods, positions of modernization within the given system and fundamental system critique oppose each other. While the former aim at the ecological modernization of capitalism and the existing democratic order (e.g., Erhard Eppler, Ralf Fücks, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker), the latter consider fundamental alternatives to be necessary. These alternatives are directed against capitalism and, in part, against the established political system. The spectrum encompasses decentralized-communitarian approaches (e.g., Carl Amery, Barbara Muraca), positions of democratized eco-socialism (e.g., Erich Fromm, Elmar Altvater) as well as centralist answers (e.g., Hans Jonas, Helge Peukert). A remarkable feature of the early discourse is the prominent position of eco-authoritarian responses, as advocated for instance by Herbert Gruhl, Wolfgang Harich or Rudolf Bahro.

Not only the spectrum of positions, but also the central dividing lines between the competing approaches remain relatively constant over time. The controversies that run through time can be described as the fundamental issues of green political thought, whereby six of these fundamental questions can be distinguished: the question of growth, the question of the causes of the ecological crisis, the question of an ecologically sustainable economic system, the question of a forward-looking political order, the question of a cultural model that can be sustained in the long term, and the question of the process of change towards the alternative concepts advocated. On these basic questions, the book identifies the conflicting positions and traces them back to their implicit background assumptions. This provides a deep understanding of these controversies and serves as an explanation for their temporal durability.

The profound interpretation of the individual positions provides an explanation on the heterogeneity of green political thought. This follows from divergent and mostly implicit background assumptions that shape the positions. Of particular importance are those premises that have always been responsible for the differentiation of political thought, such as conceptions of man, fundamental values (especially understandings of freedom and justice), ideas of well-being, and understandings of the state and politics. This shows that green political thought must also be understood as the engagement of traditional ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism or socialism with the ecological question. Moreover, also other aspects as the difference between technological optimism and pessimism and the resulting growth optimism and pessimism, as well as the difference between rather utopian perspectives and those oriented toward realpolitik are decisive for the differentiation of the landscape.

The book offers a comprehensive and in-depth mapping of ecologically motivated political ideas in the German-speaking world. Therefore, it serves as a compass and a reference work when reflecting on answers on the ecological crisis. At the same time, it makes a significant contribution to the foundation of today's sustainability discourse as well as to the completion of the German-speaking history of political ideas.