



Strengthening Democratic Governance
for Climate Transitions

D6.1 Lessons from Environmental Movements of the past (D16)

WP6 – Climate movements, democracy, and change
(UNITN)



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1. Changes with respect to the DoA

No changes with respect to the work described in the DoA.

2. Dissemination and uptake

This deliverable is for use within the project consortium and available to the general public.

3. Short summary of results (<250 words)

Over the past two decades, public involvement in environmental and climate-related regulatory decisions has expanded across Europe and beyond. These initiatives have highlighted citizens' rights to information about environmental and health risks while underscoring the democratic imperative of participatory decision-making. Moreover, environmental movements, NGOs, and activists have urged a redefinition of democratic processes.

This paper argues that such phenomena emerged as consequences of environmental activism from the 1970s and 1980s. Through analysis of social mobilizations following the Seveso disaster (Italy), the Gorleben nuclear facility controversy (Germany), and the Żarnowiec nuclear plant dispute (Poland), we trace the emergence and evolution of some specific environmental movements, examining their techniques, repertoires, democratic practices, and political demands. Despite their differences, these controversies and the following mobilization introduced environmental concerns into decision-making processes at local, national, and European levels. More significantly, they challenged the structural limitations of governments in managing risk. Confronted with opaque decision-making, technocratic delegation of power, and lack of transparency, environmental movements demanded more participatory governance forms. These movements advocated for including affected communities and citizens in public deliberation, enabling them to raise scientific and moral questions, express autonomous assessments, and help define political priorities.

This democratic transformation was largely an unintended consequence of 1970s-1980s environmental mobilization. What began with minimal ambitions – introducing environmental controls and addressing environmental crises – produced results exceeding activists' expectations: renewed political participation, grassroots knowledge production, and alternative participatory democratic models. Nevertheless, these ambitious outcomes were only partially achieved. While national and European institutions received many specific environmental protection and governance requests, citizens' and movements' involvement in decision-making processes, along with their proposals for transforming European democracies, remained marginalized.

4. Evidence of accomplishment

This report.



Preface

The overall goal of the RETOOL project is to advance our understanding of how to address the twin challenges of responding to the climate imperative while strengthening and reinvigorating democratic governance. The project has four overarching objectives: (i) To deepen our understanding of the relationship between democratic governance and the climate imperative by developing a novel analytical framework and creating new empirical underpinnings, including important new open-access datasets; (ii) To understand how a variety of democratic institutions across Europe are responding to the climate challenge, including learning lessons from history and studying new and innovative democratic practices; (iii) To contribute to reinvigorating democratic governance in Europe by developing and synthesising new knowledge and insights on climate democracy, and presenting them in a range of high-impact formats; and (iv) To serve as a bridge between academic research on climate democracy innovations and policymakers and practitioners, as well as civil society and the wider public. RETOOL brings together an international and interdisciplinary consortium, with partners from Western Europe (Ireland, UK, Belgium, Austria), Northern Europe (Finland), Eastern Europe (Estonia), and Southern Europe (Italy, Greece), combining expertise in political science, political sociology, deliberative democracy, environmental law, European studies, and public administration. The consortium includes a democracy practitioner foundation (DDF), and all partners are closely associated with practitioner and civil society networks and involved in hands-on activities. RETOOL will be undertaken by a mature, settled consortium that has significant experience of working together, with six of our nine partners core members of the EU-funded Jean Monnet Network GreenDeal-NET.

Consortium Partner	Acronym	Country	Logo
Dublin City University	DCU	IR	
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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, public involvement in environmental and climate-related regulatory decisions has expanded across Europe and beyond. These developments have underscored citizens' rights to access information on environmental and health risks, while affirming the democratic imperative of participatory decision-making. Environmental movements, NGOs, and activists have played a central role in pushing for a redefinition of democratic processes.

This paper argues that these developments are rooted in the wave of environmental activism that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. By examining three emblematic cases — the Seveso disaster in Italy, the Gorleben nuclear controversy in Germany, and the Żarnowiec nuclear plant dispute in Poland — we trace the rise and evolution of specific environmental movements, analyzing their repertoires, democratic practices, and political demands. Despite their differences, these mobilizations succeeded in introducing environmental concerns into decision-making processes at the local, national, and European levels. More importantly, they exposed the structural limitations of governments in managing ecological risks. In response to opaque decision-making, technocratic governance, and lack of transparency, environmental movements demanded more participatory forms of governance. They called for the inclusion of affected communities and citizens in public deliberation, enabling them to pose scientific and ethical questions, offer independent assessments and help shape political priorities.

This democratic shift was largely an unintended outcome of environmental mobilization in the 1970s and 1980s. What began as a demand for basic environmental controls and crisis management evolved into broader achievements: renewed political participation, grassroots knowledge production and the formulation of alternative models of participatory democracy. Yet these aspirations were only partially realized. While national and European institutions adopted many specific proposals on environmental protection and governance, the broader calls for democratizing decision-making and transforming European democracies were largely sidelined.



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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, efforts to involve the public in shaping regulations and decisions with significant environmental and climate implications have expanded both across Europe and beyond. These initiatives have not only highlighted citizens' right to be informed about potential environmental and health risks, but have also emphasised the needs and necessity of involving citizens in decision-making processes and in "Forms of Democracy": a demand that touches on multiple aspects, including participation, representation, access to information, fairness and accountability. By the same token, environmental movements, NGOs and activists have urged a redefinition of democratic process.

We argue that this participatory impulse has deep historical roots, traceable to transformations that occurred between the 1970s and early 1980s. At a general level, it was shaped by the diffusion of environmental concerns and activism, as well as by broader debates over the crisis of democracy in Western countries and the rise of political dissent in Communist Europe during the 1970s. By social and political movements, we mean groups that engage in collective action focused on conflict. They take part in political and/or cultural conflicts, and strive to promote or prevent a social change¹. Social movements are increasingly considered as relevant actors in theorizations about democracy². The connection between social movements and democratization is a twofold process: on the one side, "democratization as such further encourages people to form social movements"; on the other one, "under some conditions and in a more limited way, social movements themselves promote democratization"³. At the same time, we define environmentalism as a plural and intersectional movement, which was able to bridge local practices and supranational dimensions, scientific cultures and political participation, conflict and negotiation. In this context, the analysis is based on the fundamental dimensions of democratic governance, as identified by the RETOOL Analytical Framework: participation, representation, knowledge and information, equity, accountability and effectiveness, which are also reflected in recent studies on climate justice. These dimensions allow us to assess the extent to which environmental mobilisations have contributed to reshaping democratic practices and expanding citizens' rights within and outside institutional frameworks. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that the concept of "climate justice" is relatively recent and that its development cannot be included within the historical period under consideration. In any case, the environmentalist ideas and practices developed since the 1970s form the basis on which contemporary climate justice movements have taken shape.

This paper focuses on the rise of some local, national and transnational environmental movements and organizations across Europe during the Seventies and the Eighties. Some of them, such as Greenpeace or Legambiente, are well-known and have been largely studied by sociologists, political scientists and historians. Others, such as the environmental movements spreading out in Poland during the 1980s are less known. Still others, such as Medicina Democratica, Solidarnosc, Comunion e Liberazione or many political parties, were not environmental movements but took an active role in denouncing the lack of any form of democratic accountability during some specific environmental conflicts. To study these players, we focus on three emblematic crises from that period in which new forms of civic engagement and protest emerged: the environmental disaster in Seveso (Italy); the anti-nuclear campaign in Gorleben (West Germany); and the mobilization against the construction of nuclear power plants in Poland, which became a key moment in the rise of environmental opposition under state socialism. A fourth crisis, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, is not considered in this paper as an autonomous event, although it had a fundamental impact on all the other campaigns.

While these three case studies share the emergence of grassroots movements and activism, at both local and national levels, several important differences must be acknowledged. Two of them took place in Western democracies (Seveso, Italy, and Gerbelen, West Germany), while the third unfolded within a communist regime (Poland). The Seveso mobilization developed as a reaction to an industrial accident, whereas the

¹ Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (1999). *Social movements: An introduction*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, p.15.

² Della Porta, D., & Rossi, F. M. (2013). Democratization and social movements. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

³ Tilly, C. (2004). *Social movements, 1768–2004*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

German and Polish campaigns aimed to prevent the construction of nuclear plants. Moreover, while the Seveso mobilization ultimately failed, both the German and Polish movements succeeded in halting the projects they opposed. Despite these differences, the cases collectively illustrate how environmental ideas, practices, and forms of mobilization circulated across geographical, political, and ideological boundaries. In each case, environmental activism involved contestation of traditional political institutions and the promotion of alternative forms of democratic engagement at local, national, and even European levels. Another significant commonality was the role of experts: far from acting as neutral advisors, many sided with protest movements, lending technical legitimacy and amplifying the voices of activists. As such, the paper intends to demonstrate that, during the 1970s and 1980s, environmental activism cut across ideological divisions and helped shape democracy in Europe.

Although their overall legacy is mixed, these movements played a key role in bringing environmental issues to the forefront of public debate. They promoted alternative practices and forms of participatory democracy, thereby reinforcing critiques of national political systems, while simultaneously engaging in effective lobbying at local, national, and European levels. Consequently, the final section of the text examines the European policy and legislative framework. Building on the momentum generated by these movements, environmental concerns have gained prominence within the European public sphere and have contributed to the development of a European system of environmental governance, fostering a renewal of democratic practices at the supranational level. Specifically, activists and movements engaged with scientific knowledge, challenged institutional structures, advocated for regulatory alternatives, and, in some cases, initiated forms of collaboration and co-production of environmental knowledge. Particular attention is devoted to the period between the Chernobyl disaster and the establishment of the European Environment Agency, when demands for transparency, prevention, and participation were, at least in part, translated into structural Community-level measures. Atop of a growing body of scholarship (mostly from political science and sociology, with a minor contribution by history), our study is based on an extensive analysis of documents and primary sources held by archival repositories across the continent. These sources include: Greenpeace Archives at the Institute for Social History (Amsterdam); the Historical Archives of the European Union; the collections related to Italian associations ARCI and Legambiente held by the Fondazione Gramsci; and the Gorleben Archiv e.V.

To interpret this wide array of materials, we employ the methodological tools of political and social history, while also integrating approaches drawn from transnational history and entangled histories. The former has been described by Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier as an approach that challenges national frameworks of historical writing by examining the “links and flows” – the people, ideas, products, processes, and patterns that operate across, through, and beyond political and social borders⁴. The latter refers to the interconnectedness of different historical narratives, cultures, and societies. In this case, we use entangled history to study the interactions between different groups that mobilized to protect the environment. Building on this conceptual foundation, we adopt a transnational lens not only to trace the circulation of environmental discourses and strategies across national contexts, but also to explore how local experiences of protest and resistance contributed to the emergence of shared European (and even global) modes of environmental activism. This perspective allows us to foreground both the specificities of each case and the broader patterns of environmental contestation that transcended ideological and political divides. To frame our historical analysis, we adopt a multidimensional conception of democracy and justice, based on political theory, environmental justice, and scientific and technological studies. Specifically, we refer to the “Dimensions of Democracy” described by the RETOOL Analytical Framework, which allow us to investigate how environmental movements have interacted with institutions, generated knowledge, and opened up democratic spaces. These dimensions correspond to distinct but interconnected forms of justice: procedural, recognitive, distributive, corrective and transitional. Therefore, this report aims to be an analytical lens to highlight both the democratic potential and limitations of the grassroots mobilisations that took place in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s.

⁴ Skjelsbaek, K. (1971). The growth of international nongovernmental organization in the twentieth century. In R. Keohane & J. S. Nye Jr. (Eds.), *Transnational relations and world politics* (p. 72). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Iriye, A., & Saunier, P.-Y. (Eds.). (2009). *The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history* (p. xviii). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Tyrrell, I. (2009). Reflections on the transnational turn in United States history: Theory and practice. *Journal of Global History*, 4(3), 453-474. Snyder, S. B. (2013). Bringing the transnational in: Writing human rights into the international history of the Cold War. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 24(1), 100-116.

2. Italy: from the Seveso disaster to Legambiente

2.1 Seveso: anatomy of a disaster

On Saturday, 10 July 1976, the town of Seveso (Lombardy, Italy) experienced one of the most severe environmental disasters in contemporary European history. A malfunction in a safety valve at the ICMESA chemical plant (owned by the Swiss multinational Roche) led to the release of a toxic cloud containing dioxin and other hazardous pollutants. A 1978 Parliamentary Inquiry Commission attributed the disaster to Roche's lack of safety investments⁵.

Although the scientific community had long warned about the dangers of dioxin based on toxicological studies and laboratory experiments, epidemiological data on human exposure remained limited at the time⁶. In the immediate aftermath, the company minimized the risks and resumed production⁷. Even Italian newspapers were latecomers to the disaster. The first article on a national newspaper appeared one week later (*Corriere della Sera*, 17 July), while other newspapers (*La Stampa*, *Repubblica*) reported the news only on 21 July.⁸

It was only nine days later that Roche acknowledged the extent of the contamination and advised Italian authorities to evacuate parts of the affected area. The first political response involved the delineation of three zones: Zone A (750 people) was evacuated; Zone B (4,000 people) remained under restrictions; Zone C (31,800 people), the "Zone of Respect", was subject to precautionary measures.

Public authorities proceeded very slowly in developing concrete intervention plans, partly due to the limited scientific knowledge about dioxin, and partly because of the cumbersome nature of the public administration, which was characterized by a contradictory and unclear division of responsibilities. This was further complicated by the uncertain delineation of powers between the regional and national governments.

The local population, severely affected by the immediate consequences of the accident, showed clear signs of exasperation. Despite the frequency and scale of protests and demonstrations, these actions elicited little political response and were gradually losing the attention of the national press, which was focusing more on finding a culprit. Deep divisions emerged among residents over relocation, risk perception, and decontamination strategies. Demonstrations, protests, roadblocks, and repeated reoccupations of evacuated homes occurred⁹.

Overall, the regional authorities in Lombardy responded with a highly bureaucratic and technocratic approach, privileging administrative efficiency over participatory governance. As scholar Laura Centemeri observed, public officials perceived citizens as incapable of managing the exceptional nature of the event, thereby asserting scientific and technical expertise as the only legitimate foundation for decision-making¹⁰. Official and experts' committees were formed to address health, environment, and social impacts. Each committee was required to reach unanimous decisions and report directly to the regional government, effectively transforming these technical bodies into de facto decision-making authorities, insulated from any form of democratic oversight. This technocratic insulation was further reinforced by the creation of the Seveso Special Bureau, a dedicated administrative structure that operated without citizen input on issues affecting daily life¹¹. One final

⁵ Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the ICMESA Incident. (1978, July 25). *Final report: Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the toxic substance leak on July 10, 1976 at the ICMESA plant and the potential health and environmental risks from industrial activities* (Doc. XXIII, No. 6). Italian Parliament, VII Legislature. Camera dei Deputati and Senato della Repubblica.

⁶ Zedda, S. (1977). La lezione della cloracne. In G. Cerruti, S. Zedda, L. Conti et al. (Eds.), *Icmesa. Una rapina di salute, di lavoro e di territorio* (pp. 17-43). Milano: Mazzotta; Mocarrelli, P. (2001). Seveso: A teaching story. *Chemosphere*, 43, 391-402.

⁷ Rocca, F. (1980). I giorni della diossina. *Supplemento a Quaderni Bianchi*. Milano: Centro studi A. Grandi.

⁸ Mostacci, E., & Cerruti, L. (2011). Accadde a Seveso, 10 luglio 1976. *CnS – La Chimica nelle Scuole*, Aprile-Maggio, 93-105.

⁹ Ziglioli, B. (2017). «Un groviglio di problemi». Le conseguenze politiche, istituzionali e amministrative di un disastro industriale. *Ingegneria dell'ambiente*, 4(1).

¹⁰ Centemeri, L. (2022). Medicina Democratica e il disastro di Seveso: il movimento per la salute ambientale alla prova del territorio. *Medicina Democratica*. HAL open archive. <https://hal.science/hal-03916927/document>.

¹¹ Ibidem.

and significant move was Roche's private settlement with the Italian government, Lombardy regional authorities, and the affected municipalities. By circumventing public litigation, Roche avoided any open debate on the principles and criteria governing compensation.

However, this absence of transparency and democratic accountability catalysed widespread grassroots mobilization, driven primarily by three distinct groups: autonomous environmental activists and local population; Medicina Democratica, a leftist organization advocating a radical critique of capitalism to protect public health; and Comunione e Liberazione, a conservative Catholic movement.

In October, various forms of protest took place: in one instance, residents of Zone A blocked the Milan-Meda road in an attempt to return to their homes; in another, demonstrators opposed the plan to build an incinerator in Seveso. The most original analysis of the crisis was offered by Medicina Democratica. Founded shortly before the disaster, viewed the crisis as a symptom of systemic injustice rooted in a profit-driven model that jeopardized public health. The organization denounced both the exploitation inherent in the industrial system and the lack of democratic oversight during the crisis. As Dr. Giulio Maccacaro stated in a 1976 report:

"The people of Seveso and of the towns affected by the cloud were prevented from gaining genuine knowledge of their own conditions and problems; they were effectively excluded from making autonomous decisions about their own fate and their property and were objectified in the most systematic and brutal way"¹².

In response, Medicina Democratica implemented an alternative model of civic engagement by forming the *Comitato Tecnico Scientifico Popolare* (Scientific Technical Popular Committee), which included workers, lawyers, journalists, scientists, and doctors. This grassroots body functioned as a counter-expertise institution. It monitored public policies, denounced the opacity of official decisions, provided independent scientific analyses, and promoted citizen mobilization aimed at: decontaminating polluted areas, safeguarding employment, eliminating hazardous working conditions, and establishing community-run health services¹³. This mobilization had a strong democratic ethos: it sought not only to represent victims, but also to empower them as informed actors in shaping their future. Victims were seen as both witnesses and experts, whose lived experience granted them a moral authority to demand justice and prevent the repetition of such tragedies. Nevertheless, few local residents joined the Committee. Many were hesitant to speak out and felt that the group ignored their emotional ties to the land. In this context, local attachment to place and livelihood was at times perceived by the movement as a hindrance to broader structural critique¹⁴.

This gap was soon filled by other actors, notably Comunione e Liberazione and environmental activists. Comunione e Liberazione joined the controversy over Seveso denouncing the Region's decision to authorize abortions, despite still being illegal in Italy, and disregarding the women's trauma. The issue soon overshadowed concerns about environmental health and chronic pollution in the area. A new political cleavage emerged within the mobilization, especially given the strong presence of Catholic culture in the Seveso area. Consequently, Medicina Democratica lost the support of certain local Catholic and conservative groups. Local environmentalists contested Medicina Democratica's neglect for the attachment to the territory expressed by some inhabitants as part of their conception of well-being, and thus as a resource to be defended in response to the emergency. For many local residents, the struggle for health was also a struggle for the protection of the landscape, for the defense of their connection to the land, and for preserving traditions and a vision of a world that was no longer present—if it had ever truly existed¹⁵. Yet the ideological divergences between Medicina Democratica, the environmentalists, and the Catholic movement – combined with the ongoing scientific uncertainty about dioxin's long-term effects – prevented the emergence of a unified front, at least for the moment. Although these groups shared core demands (e.g., stricter public health regulations, citizens' involvement in risk management), their inability to forge a common platform often led to fragmentation and

¹² Maccacaro, G. A. (1976). Seveso, un crimine di pace. *Sapere*, 79(796), 4-9.

¹³ Centemeri, L. (2022). *Medicina Democratica e il disastro di Seveso*.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem; See also Conti, L. (1977). *Visto da Seveso: l'evento straordinario e l'ordinaria amministrazione* (pp. 71-75). Milano: Feltrinelli; Mascherpa, B. (1990). *La stampa quotidiana e la catastrofe di Seveso: verità e falsità dei giornali di fronte al problema "aborto"*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

mutual opposition rather than collaboration.

2.2 From Seveso to Legambiente

Despite this fragmentation, the Seveso disaster served as a catalyst for environmental and democratic activism in Italy. Though local campaigns failed to change regional governance, they pushed many activists to shift their efforts to the national level. The main interpreter of such a shift was Legambiente. Officially established in 1980 under the name “Lega per l’Ambiente” (League for the Environment), it aimed to combine scientific analysis with strong roots in local territories and movements. The organization’s consolidation during the 1980s occurred at a time of transition for democratic forms of associationism, marked by the crisis of technocratic environmentalism and a search for new civic participation models¹⁶. From its earliest foundational acts, Legambiente demonstrated a clear intention to present itself as a competent and credible interlocutor. The leadership group, formed in May 1980, included ARCI figures and professionals from science and planning, reflecting an early technopolitical orientation¹⁷.

From the very beginning, the relationship among the environment, energy, and political decision-making was at the heart of the association’s discourse, emphasizing the need for an alternative to the government’s energy plans and asserting the necessity for civil society organizations to play an active role in societal transformation through their cultural and ideological pluralism. The National Conference on Energy and Environment, held in Messina in December 1978, represented an initial public moment of convergence among technical experts, association representatives, and political actors. On that occasion, the urgency of producing and disseminating environmental knowledge was strongly emphasized, as was the need to address energy issues beyond ideological dogmatism, relying on cultural and ideological pluralism as well as the association’s popular roots. Frequent references were made to the Seveso disaster and to the lack of transparency shown by political authorities in managing the crisis¹⁸.

In 1979, internal consultations and the drafting of preparatory notes for the association’s statute began. These emphasized that the future League should be based on democratic structures, with democratically elected bodies, organized on a territorial basis, and valorize both scientific expertise and mass participation. The envisioned organizational structure was to be light and flexible, but with a national coordination body, aimed at promoting the autonomy and development of local initiatives. The objective was explicitly political: to build a network capable of influencing institutional decisions, fostering a new civic culture, and representing emerging social needs through the lens of environmental issues.

By the time of its second congress in 1983, Legambiente had achieved its aim of linking environmental demands to broader change. This vision went beyond a merely conservationist perspective, aspiring instead to a global outlook. At the same time, the congress recognized the extreme diversity and complexity of practices within ecological culture: direct political action, the organization of alternative everyday practices and lifestyles, recreational and touristic activities linked to the environment, cooperative production models, individual competencies, and interest groups. Indeed, Legambiente was atop of a “Green Archipelago”¹⁹.

The organizational culture that emerges from Legambiente’s early years is marked by a delicate balance: on the one hand, the effort to develop a technically competent and professional profile; on the other, the determination to maintain a continuous relationship with its grassroots membership, schools, and social movements. It was neither an NGO nor a spontaneous movement, but a civic actor connecting knowledge, mobilization, and institutions, whose mobilization was not in opposition to the party system, but aimed at

¹⁶ Farro, A. (1991). *La lente verde: cultura, politica e azione collettiva ambientalista*. Milano: FrancoAngeli. Della Seta, R. (2000). *La difesa dell’ambiente in Italia: storia e cultura del movimento ecologista*. Milano: FrancoAngeli. Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2004). *Movimenti senza protesta? L’ambientalismo in Italia*. Bologna: il Mulino. Della Valentina, G. (2011). *Storia dell’ambientalismo in Italia: lo sviluppo insostenibile*. Milano: B. Mondadori. Fontana, E. (Ed.). (2020). *La nostra Italia. I 40 anni di Legambiente*. Rimini: La Biblioteca del Cigno.

¹⁷ Fondazione Gramsci (FG), Archivio Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (ARCI), *Corrispondenza interna*, 13 maggio 1980, busta (b.) 417, fascicolo (f.) 1512

¹⁸ ARCI. (1979, 15 gennaio). Convegno su energia e ambiente. *Notizia ARCI*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ Diani, M. (1988). *Isole nell’arcipelago: il movimento ecologista in Italia*. Bologna: il Mulino.

playing a role of stimulus, proposal, and pressure. The association positions itself as a “critical instrument.”

2.3 The emergence of an environmental culture

Legambiente developed a political culture aimed at integrating environmentalism with a broader vision of citizenship, democracy, and participation. Unlike earlier conservationist groups that focused on protecting nature and heritage, Legambiente framed ecological struggles within political and social contestation. This development of environmentalism was, among other factors, shaped by the ideals of 1968 and 1970s mobilizations, promoting collective well-being and the common good. “Think globally, act locally”: the environment becomes a site of conflict involving the entire development model. A crisis of individualistic values underpinning consumerist growth is emerging. At the same time, a linear conception of development and of the human-nature relationship is called into question. The alternative, it is argued, lies in a model in which “life experiences and acts of production and consumption are seen as part of a process that respects natural cycles. This implies a fairer use and distribution of resources, both among humans and in the relationship between humans and the environment”²⁰. This orientation translates into a political practice grounded in the dissemination of knowledge, the capacity for strategic planning, and the construction of social ties. The emphasis on environmental education, territorial planning, and rootedness in local contexts is integral to the association’s cultural strategy, which aims to form active and informed citizens, rather than mere consumers of ecological campaigns.

The second national congress, held in 1983, marked a pivotal moment in the construction of the association’s cultural identity. It asserted the need for educational and project-based environmentalism involving citizens beyond protest. The rejection of elitist or purely testimonial environmentalism was accompanied by a claim to an active role in engaging with public policy, enabling the association to formulate proposals, develop alternatives, and take part in concrete decision-making, assuming responsibility for the governance of territory and society. This also entailed the capacity to build social alliances, collaborate with local authorities, and promote territorial campaigns.

The goal was to move beyond an emergency-driven or fragmented view of environmental issues, and to affirm instead an integrated approach, one capable of linking ecology, economy, and the quality of democracy. This framework is based on an idea of informed and participatory citizenship, supported by grassroots work in local territories. The language used reflects the desire to reach a broad audience, avoiding excessive technical jargon while maintaining analytical rigor. The objective is to build civic skills through education and collaboration with local administrations. The cultural foundation is explicitly conflictual, yet not ideological. The association situates itself among mass movements that engage in institutional dialogue, rejecting both neutrality and partisan subordination. In this sense, autonomy is a condition for meaningful dialogue, not its refusal.

A more articulate reflection on the cultural coordinates of environmentalism was already being proposed at the beginning of the decade by Legambiente’s Secretary Enrico Testa. In his ambitious view, ecological politics was shaking Italy’s party system, challenging old models and priorities: quality of life, the relationship with nature, and responsibility toward future generations. The idea that the environmental movement might become a fully-fledged political party was already being explored, along with the associated challenges. He warned that integration into parliament could neutralize the movement’s impact. Yet he also emphasized the necessity of equipping the movement with political tools capable of influencing decisions. Within this context, he invited reflection on the idea of the Greens, who would only formally establish themselves in 1986, not as a party, but as a “network” of actors and practices capable of transforming politics from within, opening it to new conflicts and previously excluded demands. He evoked the need for a radically different imaginary, one that would not merely “paint existing programs green,” but subvert them. Central to this vision are critiques of industrialism, the defense of commons, decentralization, and citizen protagonism: a perspective that is neither nostalgic nor technocratic, but culturally and socially alternative²¹.

²⁰ FG, ARCI. (1983, 25–27 marzo). *Appunti per il II Congresso Nazionale della Lega per l’Ambiente*, b. 26.

²¹ Testa, E. (1981?). *Il bianco e nero della politica. Le tinte forti del mutamento*. In *La talpa giovedì*.

The association's political culture thus rests on three main pillars: education and training as tools for civic emancipation; critical autonomy as a condition for effective action; and the capacity to design and propose alternatives as a means of overcoming sterile opposition. Environmentalism is not a separate field, but a lens through which to interpret power relations, decision-making mechanisms, and the material conditions of citizens' lives.

2.4 Legambiente's mobilization and campaign

Legambiente's mobilization repertoire has always combined local action, political pressure, and media engagement. Its strength lies in translating environmentalism into civic language, turning campaigns into tools for education and legitimacy.

A paradigmatic example is the anti-nuclear mobilization following the Chernobyl disaster. "La Nuova Ecologia"'s magazine, released days after the disaster, exemplified activist communication: using analyses, maps, and testimonies, it denounced the dangers of nuclear power and invoked citizens' rights to know and decide. The incident became a catalyst for a national campaign combining mass mobilization with a counter-narrative. Within a few months, this campaign led to broad-based opposition that culminated in the November 1987 referenda against nuclear power²². From the outset, the movement denounced the inability of the society and institutions to learn from such catastrophe, criticizing the systematic withholding of information and the inadequacy of public communication. While often relegated to the role of Cassandra, the environmental movement emerged as one of the few forces capable of proposing a concrete and responsible alternative. In a "schizophrenic" nuclear debate, where risks were admitted yet new reactors defended, Legambiente called for a cultural shift: a profound rethinking of the relationship between technology, politics, and society. According to the environmental movement, the only realistic solution was to stop new plants, promote conservation and renewables, and redefine development around quality of life²³.

Local action extended far beyond major cities. Numerous references point to environmental conflicts concerning landfills, quarries, industrial sites, and real estate speculation. It was the local chapters that mobilized—documenting violations, compiling dossiers, and promoting protests. These were not episodic or reactive interventions, but rather the organized practice of environmental citizenship, capable of combining conflict with proposal. This approach gave rise to a dynamic tension between bottom-up spontaneity and central coordination: while aware of the challenges of managing a multifaceted network, the association consistently rejected any drift toward centralism.

2.5 Environmental action and democratic gaps

The mobilization of the Seveso population resulted in a partial failure. Despite the gravity of the disaster and their constant mobilization, they were unable to alter local or national governance. On the contrary, the technocratic solution developed by Lombardy was an emergency solution completely disconnected from the demands of the local community. Nevertheless, it achieved two main results. First, it brought to light a general demand for citizens' involvement in environmental governance. Second, out of this initial failure emerged Legambiente, Italy's first environmental organization whose main purpose was to affirm the link between democracy and the environment by calling for the direct involvement of citizens in all political decisions that would impact the environment. The strength of Legambiente lies, therefore, in its capacity to integrate content, tools, and relationships. Its campaigns serve simultaneously as instruments of pressure, moments of education, and participatory experiences. The association acts as a bridge between local conflicts and the national public sphere, building mobilization not as reaction, but as strategy.

²² Citoni, M., & Papa, C. (2017). *Sinistra ed ecologia in Italia, 1968–1974*. I Quaderni di Altrionovecento. Brescia: Fondazione Luigi Micheletti. Gentili, S. (2002). *Ecologia e sinistra: Un incontro difficile* Roma: Editori Riuniti. Tessei, R. (2024). I comunisti italiani nella crisi nucleare di Cernobyl': tra industrialismo e spinte ambientaliste. *Italia contemporanea*, (304), 61-85.

²³ Realacci, E. (1986, maggio). Non aspettiamo la prossima Chernobyl. *La nuova ecologia*, p. 3.

3. Environmental resistance in Germany: protest, knowledge and democracy at Gorleben

3.1 Territory, identity, and protest in Wendland

The Gorleben events are among the most emblematic and enduring cases in German environmentalism. They became a symbol of civil resistance that, for over three decades, combined local roots, critique of the energy model, and grassroots democracy. In 1977 the Lower Saxony government designated Wendland as a nuclear site, triggering a mobilization that soon became national and transnational. The decision lacked consultation or independent assessment, as later admitted by some officials²⁴.

The response was immediate: in 1977 the Bürgerinitiative Lüchow-Dannenberg was founded, becoming the nucleus of a heterogeneous yet cohesive movement that challenged both the project and the top-down decision process²⁵. The conflict escalated in 1980 with the occupation of the drilling site and the establishment of the Freie Republik Wendland, a self-managed community that, for 33 days, embodied a concrete experiment in direct democracy and environmental participation. Although short-lived, this experience acquired symbolic significance and attracted large media attention²⁶.

The link between rural identity and resistance is one of the defining traits of the Gorleben movement. Many of the activists, primarily local farmers, framed Wendland as a natural territory threatened by externally imposed industrial decisions. Within this framework, some segments of the movement explicitly invoked the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, reinterpreted as a symbol of radical ecological ethics: the pamphlet *Franziskus in Gorleben. Protest für die Schöpfung*, published in the early 1980s, used creation care language to legitimize the protest spiritually²⁷.

In the following years, opposition increasingly focused on the transport of high-level radioactive waste (Castor transports), especially from 1995 onward. Each train became a political event, sparking mass demonstrations and nonviolent actions. Police repression, documented by inquiries and reports, boosted the movement's cohesion and visibility²⁸.

The Gorleben experience helped consolidate the Grünen, who entered the Bundestag in 1983, and more broadly led to the emergence of a new ecological culture in Germany. The movement was also one of the incubators of the *Energiewende*, the recent German energy transition plan based on phasing out nuclear power and expanding renewable energy sources. Opposition to Gorleben must be interpreted as part of a "political and cultural bifurcation" that set Germany on a different energy path²⁹.

Only in 2020 was the Gorleben site officially excluded from the list of suitable permanent geological repositories

²⁴ Wollny, L. (1998). *Es wird wie ein Kartenhaus zusammenbrechen*: retrieved from <https://www.gorleben-archiv.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Lu%CC%88qengeschichten-1.pdf>. Liselotte "Lilo" Wollny (1926-2019) was a central figure in the German anti-nuclear movement, particularly in the Wendland region, home to the nuclear waste storage site of Gorleben. Her transformation from housewife to environmental movement leader began in 1977, with the events described in this chapter. Wollny joined the newly formed *Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Lüchow-Dannenberg* (Citizens' Initiative for Environmental Protection Lüchow-Dannenberg), quickly becoming one of its most influential figures. She assumed leadership roles within the movement, serving as spokesperson and, in 1986, as its chairperson. In 1987, she was elected to the Bundestag as an independent on the list of the Green Party of Lower Saxony, serving until 1990. She is remembered as the "mother of the German anti-nuclear resistance," a symbol of activism rooted in everyday life and civic determination. Her commitment left a lasting mark on the struggle against nuclear energy in Germany.

²⁵ Darst, R., & Dawson, J. I. (2008). Baptists and bootleggers, once removed: The politics of radioactive waste internalization in the European Union. *Global Environmental Politics*, 8(2), 17-38.

²⁶ Buchholz, P. (2020). Unlikely escapes: Ecological counterculture in Franz Kraherberger's *Humbolts Reise*. *Monatshefte*, 112(1), 102-126.

²⁷ Bahr, H.-E., et al. (Eds.). (1981). *Franziskus in Gorleben. Protest für die Schöpfung* (Orig.-Ausg.). Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verl.

²⁸ Statewatch. (2011, March). *Policing popular mass protests: The transport of nuclear waste at Gorleben* (Analysis No. 144). London: Statewatch.

²⁹ Hébert, J., & Schmid, L. (2024). Du refus du nucléaire aux mobilisations contre le charbon: les mouvements environnementalistes allemands entre bifurcation et imbrication. *Hérodote*, 194(3), 71-72.

for nuclear waste. The archive "Gorleben Archiv e.V." continues to collect and disseminate documentation on the Wendland resistance, preserving the memory of a struggle that shaped German environmental politics.

3.2 The birth of the Movement (1977-1980)

The 1977 decision to designate Gorleben for a nuclear complex, including a geological repository for high-level waste and a reprocessing plant, sparked one of Europe's longest-lasting environmental mobilizations. The choice of the village was not based on sound geological criteria, but for political reasons: low population, proximity to the GDR border, and presumed marginal media impact. The opaque process excluded the public and ignored demands for independent review. Locals saw the decision as top-down and as a symbolic expropriation.

In response, the Bürgerinitiative Lüchow-Dannenberg was founded in the same year, becoming the first organized core of resistance. This grassroots initiative, promoted by farmers, activists, and local residents, positioned itself as an intermediary actor between popular protest and the political structuring of dissent. It reflected a broader politicization of local communities through anti-nuclear mobilization. More generally, "the excitement generated by far-flung and 'unprecedented' rural reactor site occupations gives credence to the idea that localized action can, and frequently does, have global ramifications"³⁰.

A key early event was the 1979 *Hannover Trek*, a seven-day march from Gorleben to Hanover led by hundreds of tractors and culminating in a demonstration attended by over 100,000 people. The protest reaffirmed the movement's rural base while projecting it nationally, calling into question the legitimacy of the entire German nuclear program. This alliance between the rural world and urban networks became one of the most effective features of the mobilization, also seen in other European contexts (for example, the connection between communities in the Italian province of Viterbo and the 1977 youth movements opposing the Montalto di Castro nuclear power project)³¹.

The apex of this initial phase came in the spring of 1980 with the occupation of the drilling site and the proclamation of the Freie Republik Wendland. Around 800 activists created a self-managed community with basic structures: kitchen, school, library, assembly. The experiment lasted 33 days before being dismantled by a massive police operation authorized by the federal government. The Freie Republik symbolized both resistance and a critique of representative democracy, promoting grassroots alternatives. It was also the culmination of a process of transnational learning, in which German activists refined strategies through international exchanges, escalating actions over time³².

However, the significance of this phase goes beyond the episode of occupation. It inaugurated a repertoire of protest that would be repeated over the following years: creative, rooted actions with strong public communication. References to spiritual symbols like Saint Francis of Assisi gave the struggle ethical resonance. The booklet *Franziskus in Gorleben*, for example, offered theological material framing protest as "care for creation".

The years 1977-1980 mark the genesis of a movement that, beginning as a localized protest, offered a deep critique of technocracy and the failure of democracy to connect central and local power. Gorleben became a laboratory of ecological participation, anticipating future environmental.

³⁰ Milder, S. (2014). Between grassroots activism and transnational aspirations: Anti-nuclear protest from the Rhine Valley to the Bundestag, 1974-1983. *Historical Social Research*, 39, 208.

³¹ Papa, C. (2020). Energia, democrazia, sviluppo. *Meridiana*, 98, 241-254.

³² Tompkins, A. (2016). Grassroots transnationalism(s): Franco-German opposition to nuclear energy in the 1970s. *Contemporary European History*, 25(1), 125.

3.3 Between continuity and adaptation: the long years of struggle (1981-1995)

After the Freie Republik Wendland was cleared in 1980, the Gorleben movement entered a less visible but deeply rooted phase. A long cycle of mobilization began. Reduced visibility allowed activists to consolidate networks and territorial bonds. As such, it became a sort of permanent resistance. During this period, the Wendland developed an alternative collective identity: as both a space of opposition and a civic laboratory.

Throughout the 1980s, while the government continued geological exploration and infrastructure planning, local communities built a true dissent network: camps, info points, alternative schools, workshops. In parallel, nonviolent, theatrical protest and rural imagery, such as tractor-led marches or massive human chains across the countryside. The movement succeeded in forging a strong identity by combining tradition with alternative culture. Although the reprocessing project was suspended in 1983, the nuclear infrastructure continued to develop. A temporary storage facility (*Zwischenlager*) was completed, and geological exploration of the Gorleben salt dome continued. At the federal level, the nuclear issue remained divisive, but environmentalists gained ground with the Grünen's entry into the Bundestag (1983). The Gorleben protest played a central role in shaping the original identity of the German Green political component, linking energy, democracy, and environmental justice. Moreover, the emergence of climate change as a political issue transformed the broader context without weakening the anti-nuclear front. Movements reformulated their arguments, firmly opposing attempts to rehabilitate nuclear power as a "clean" energy source.

This context exemplifies continuity and rootedness. The mobilization in West Germany gave rise to alternative forms of political participation grounded in a strong connection to place, helping movements remain active during political marginalization. The construction of an autonomous social and symbolic space in the Wendland enabled the movement's endurance, making it a bulwark against centralizing energy policy³³.

A pivotal moment arrived in 1995, with the high-level radioactive waste transport to Gorleben marked the start of the *Castor* era. This transition reactivated large-scale mobilization and marked the beginning of a new, more radical phase, in which activists tried to develop a dialogue with the media. The 1981–1995 period consolidated resistance ethics, social ties, and counter-information networks.

The longevity and symbolic depth of this experience gave rise to what may be described as a *Widerstandskultur*, a deeply rooted, participatory, and everyday culture of resistance. Situated between movement cultures³⁴ and protest subcultures³⁵, these configurations went beyond episodic activation, structuring languages and practices capable of sustaining action over time despite changing political, social, and technological conditions. Wendland's artistic and symbolic protest formed a strong territorial identity.

3.4 Spirituality, identity and protest culture: symbols and discourses of the Movement

The Gorleben movement developed a symbolic and spiritual culture that strengthened cohesion and expanded public resonance. Unlike other contemporary environmental movements, the resistance in the Wendland built an imaginary rooted in local heritage, turning dissent into collective identity.

One of the most significant aspects was the intertwining of ecological protest with religious references. The figure of Saint Francis of Assisi became a symbol of a spiritual ecology centred on the "care for creation." This perspective left a mark on the publication and dissemination of the booklet *Franziskus in Gorleben*, already mentioned above, which integrated faith with ecological militancy through prayers and reflections. The text

³³ Milder, S. (2017). *Greening democracy: The anti-nuclear movement and political environmentalism in West Germany and beyond, 1968-1983*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁴ Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1996). *Social movements: A cognitive approach*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

³⁵ Melucci, A., Keane, J., & Mier, P. (1989). *Nomads of the present: Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.



proposed a protest as love for the earth, defence of life, and Christian-inspired nonviolence. Francis symbolized the antithesis of nuclear technocracy, embodying a humble, cooperative, and harmonious vision of the relationship between humanity and nature. Moreover, by the late 1970s, the Franciscan order was embracing environmental concerns and opposing nuclear energy. A contribution by a local Protestant pastor, Gottfried Mahlke, recalled early religious opposition against the nuclear waste disposal project. In particular, it described the first “political worship” held on the eve of the major demonstration of 12 March 1977, in which Christian liturgy became a space for civil opposition and ecological awareness. The text concluded by evoking the emergence of alternative lifestyles in the region, such as the *Regenbogenlädchen* (literally, “little rainbow shop”) cooperative promoting sustainable living. The booklet included an ecologically reinterpreted version of the Our Father.

Gottesdienst am Vorabend der Demonstration 11/3/1977 - Vater-unser-Gebet	Worship Service on the Eve of the Demonstration 11 March 1977 - Our Father Prayer
<p>Weil viele Menschen bei uns Angst haben vor morgen und wir merken, wie stark uns diese Angst lähmt, darum wenden ir uns an dich, Herr, und sagen: Vater unser.</p> <p>Alle: Befreie uns, Herr. Laß uns nachdenken über deinen Willen, Herr. Gib uns Mut zum Handeln, Herr.</p> <p>Weil wir merken, daß wir alleine nicht zurechtkommen, weil wir die Grenzen des Wachstums erahnen und erleben, daß es für uns immer schwerer wird, deine Welt zu bewahren und Weil es uns nicht gelingt, die Welt nach deinem Willen zu gestalten, darum beten wir: Geheiligt werde dein Name.</p>	<p>Because many people among us are afraid of tomorrow, and we feel how deeply this fear paralyzes us, we turn to you, Lord, and say: Our Father.</p> <p>All: Free us, Lord. Let us reflect on your will, Lord. Give us the courage to act, Lord.</p> <p>Because we realize that we cannot manage on our own, because we sense and experience the limits of growth, because it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to preserve your world, and because we fail to shape the world according to your will, we pray: Hallowed be thy name.</p>

This sacralisation helped shape Wendland’s “alternative” identity: not merely as a site of conflict, but also as sacred ground, a place to be protected and cherished. As a result, the movement acquired a communal and quasi-ritual character: demonstrations included prayer, silent marches, and ecological liturgies. This approach amplified the moral significance of the anti-nuclear stance, grounding it in a broader and deeper worldview than a purely technical-scientific critique.

The Gorleben movement constitutes a paradigmatic example of how environmental mobilisations often transcend technical or expert dimensions, articulating a cultural and moral discourse capable of fostering profound social transformation. Franciscan spirituality, rural identity, and symbolic creativity held the diverse community together.

3.5 The Castor Transports and the radicalisation of protest (1995-2011)

From 1995 to 2011, Gorleben became the recurring destination of *Castor* shipments of radioactive waste. This practice assumed political significance, triggering mass mobilisation and confrontation with institutions. During this period, the anti-nuclear protest in Germany evolved: it grew in scale, professionalised, and radicalised its practices, while remaining largely nonviolent.

The first shipment in 1995 provoked immediate reactions. Activists organised blockades, marches, and coordinated actions with regional and foreign groups. Media coverage increased with each subsequent transport, as did the organisational capacity of the movement. A convergence with French networks, where

most waste came from, boosted the protest's legitimacy³⁶. However, these groups largely avoided addressing the core issue of radioactive and toxic waste management, much of which was illegally or inadequately disposed of in developing countries³⁷.

Over time, direct actions became increasingly sophisticated, with blockades using radio, maps, and links with student, union, and religious networks, resembling the mobilisation against missile installations in the early 1980s. The strategy was to exhaust police resources: each transport required costly deployments and regional shutdowns. In this context, police responses became increasingly militarised over the years, fuelling a spiral of tension. Authorities used fences, special units, helicopters, and preventive detention, leading to legal controversies and accusations of civil rights violations³⁸. Despite repression, the protest solidified as a social and political ritual. Demonstrations were no longer confined to transport days: Gorleben became a laboratory of ecological participation with regular events and assemblies. The *Castor-Blockade* became part of the movement's identity, and the site became a symbol of enduring resistance in public discourse³⁹.

The movement's objective of bringing nuclear waste management to the forefront of national political debate was largely achieved, forcing governments to engage with an active, informed, and organised civil society. The impossibility of proceeding without territorial consent undermined the top-down approach that had previously dominated German energy policy, leading to vertical conflicts with the state and internal divisions among Social Democrats and the Greens⁴⁰.

3.6 Legacies, memory and Environmental Democracy

The Gorleben struggle left a deep imprint on German political culture, beyond its material success (the site's exclusion in 2020), shaping democratic, cultural, and symbolic legacy. While environmentalism was partly institutionalised as a technical issue, the movement used the crisis to question representative democracy and push for participation and popular control⁴¹.

First, Gorleben contributed to redefining the relationship between citizenship and political decision-making in environmental and energy matters. The rejection of top-down impositions became a model for participatory and locally rooted governance. The German movement proposed a "social project" in which climate policy served democratic renewal, empowerment, and energy democratisation⁴². Second, this experience contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the *Energiewende*, Germany's strategic energy transition from the 2000s onwards. Social pressure and the nuclear legitimacy crisis following Fukushima made the 2011 nuclear phase-out politically viable⁴³.

Finally, Gorleben emerged as a site of active memory. The *Gorleben Archiv e.V.*, founded in 2001, plays a key role in preserving and disseminating testimonies of resistance. Now a cultural centre, its archives are accessible to researchers and citizens. It represents a concrete example of public history, demonstrating how social movement memory can be institutionalised without losing its critical edge.

In conclusion, the legacy of Gorleben unfolds in at least three directions: a transformation of German political culture towards greater openness to participation and public conflict; a concrete impact on energy policy; and

³⁶ Tompkins, A. (2016). *Grassroots transnationalism(s)*, p. 135.

³⁷ Clapp, J. (2001). *Toxic exports: The transfer of hazardous wastes from rich to poor countries*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

³⁸ Sturdee, S. (2008, November 11). Police break up German nuclear protest. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/world/police-break-up-german-nuclear-protest-20081111-5lw7.html>.

³⁹ Kirchhof, A. M. (2018). East-West German transborder entanglements through the nuclear waste sites in Gorleben and Morsleben. *Journal for the History of Environment and Society*, 3, 152-155.

⁴⁰ Darst, R., & Dawson, J. I. (2008). *Baptists and bootleggers, once removed*, pp. 30-33.

⁴¹ Milder, S. (2022). Re-interpreting West Germany's ecological revolution: Environmental politics, grassroots activism, and democracy in the long 1970s. *European History Quarterly*, 52(3), 332-351.

⁴² Morris, C., & Jungjohann, A. (2016). *Energy democracy: Germany's Energiewende to renewables*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴³ Uekötter, F. (2014). *The greenest nation? A new history of German environmentalism* (History for a Sustainable Future). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.



the creation of a symbolic and documentary heritage that continues to inspire new generations of activists. Wendland remains a key reference, showing how local protest can trigger change and offer a just, sustainable vision of public action. Once an imposed wound, Gorleben is now a site of collective memory and lived democracy.

4. Poland: from Żarnowiec to the democratic transition

4.1 The emergence of environmentalism in Communist Poland

The history of the Polish environmental movement during the 1980s is one of modest beginnings and unexpectedly significant outcomes. Although initially characterized by limited ambitions, the movement ultimately played a role in the broader democratization processes at the end of the decade. Like its Western counterparts, the Polish environmental movement succeeded in mobilizing a wide array of social groups, including students, young families, local communities, scientists, academics, and workers. It introduced both a novel repertoire of protest and new environmental issues that had previously been absent from public discourse.

The emergence of the movement can be attributed to at least three interrelated factors.

First, despite prevailing assumptions, environmental concerns were not entirely absent from Polish society or from the agenda of the communist government. Polish authorities engaged with environmental issues not only for pragmatic reasons, but also as matters of national and cultural value. Scientific communities – particularly biologists, botanists, and geologists – also contributed to shaping a system of nature protection for their academic and professional purposes⁴⁴. A number of environmental associations were permitted to operate under state oversight, part of a so-called “organized civil society”: associations such as the *Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zwierzętami* (Society for the Care of Animals) and the *Liga Ochrony Przyrody* (League for the Protection of Nature, LOP) focused on conservation and school-based environmental education⁴⁵. LOP published educational materials and the monthly magazine *Przyroda Polska*.⁴⁶ The Nature Protection Watch (SOP), founded in 1957, had similar aims. Like the aforementioned associations, SOP did not pose an ideological threat to the regime⁴⁷.

Moreover, by the 1970s, the Polish government had introduced a series of environmental regulations. In 1972, it established a Ministry of Land Administration and Environmental Protection; by 1981, the country had fourteen national parks and numerous natural reserves. In 1980, a comprehensive environmental law was passed, creating the State Inspectorate for Environmental Protection. Second, the 1970s saw a growing exposure to Western countries, which contributed to the emergence of new political and social dynamics within Poland. Increased ties with the West under Gierek spurred both industrial expansion and grassroots ecological awareness and access to information about environmental pollution in both Poland and Europe generated grassroots pressure against these plans. Scientists, local officials, and citizens protested threats to protected areas and pollution from heavy industry, such as the planned exploitation of coal reserves near the Greater Poland National Park and the pollution caused by the Skawina aluminium plant⁴⁸. Third, the flourishing of environmental activism in Poland was also an unintended consequence of the political ferment triggered by the events of 1980, the so-called “carnival of Solidarity”⁴⁹. *Solidarność*’s rise in 1980 fostered greater openness, enabling new initiatives and access to environmental data, and enabling the formation of new spontaneous initiatives. During this period, *Solidarność* itself demanded that the government disclose full data

⁴⁴ Gliński, P., & Koziarek, M. (2007). Nature protection NGOs in Poland: Between tradition, professionalism and radicalism. In C. S. A. von Kroppenfeld & W. T. Markham (Eds.), *Protecting nature: Organizations and networks in Europe and the USA* (pp. [specificare]). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing; Magno, F. (2025). La storia ambientale dell’Europa centro-orientale comunista: un bilancio post guerra fredda. *Passato e Presente*, 14, 131-141.

⁴⁵ Ekiert, G., & Foa, R. (2011). *Civil society weakness in post-communist Europe: A preliminary assessment* (Collegio Carlo Alberto Working Papers No. 198). <https://www.carloalberto.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/no.198.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Gliński, P., & Koziarek, M. (2007). *Nature protection NGOs in Poland*.

⁴⁷ Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2017). *Polish environmental movement 1980–2017: (De)legitimization, politics & ecological crises* (ESPRI Working Papers No. 6). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3075126.

⁴⁸ Piotrowski, G. (2015). The “other” democratization in Poland: The case of environmental protection movement. In I. Vlad & K. Fábíán (Eds.), *Democratization through social activism: Gender and environmental issues in post-communist countries* (pp. 235-263). Bucharest: Tritonic.

⁴⁹ Valacchi, M. (2022). *Solidarność, la Chiesa e i contadini: per un’analisi del processo di integrazione europea della Polonia. Storia e problemi contemporanei*, 90(2), 100-121.

on pollution and environmental degradation. Several environmental groups were established (often with the active support of *Solidarność* members) aimed at protecting local ecosystems. Among these groups, the Polish Ecological Club (*Polski Klub Ekologiczny*, PKE), founded in 1980 in Kraków, became the most significant beneficiary of this liberalizing environment. With some 20,000 members, PKE combined expert knowledge with grassroots activism. In contrast to other Polish environmental organizations, and similarly to many Western movements, the PKE involved scientists and professionals, challenging state policy through legal means, scientific analysis, and popularizing ecological problems⁵⁰.

Although the PKE carefully avoided direct political affiliations or overt anti-communist rhetoric, it nonetheless positioned itself in explicit opposition to the ruling class's ideological assumptions:

“The Club represents a change in ideology away from that of previous planners. Their beliefs were based on optimism and faith in the ability of mankind to control and understand physical, biological and social processes through science and technology. [...] supports limits to growth and believes that decentralization is a key element in the fight against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Humans are subject to natural laws and if the ecological crisis is to be overcome, nature must be held in greater respect”⁵¹.

As such, the PKE was the first environmental organization to articulate a systemic critique of the regime. It was tolerated because it was not initially perceived as a direct challenge to state legitimacy. Nonetheless, it soon became a “strong challenger to the regime” and a forum for alternative public discourse⁵². The imposition of Martial Law in December 1981 and the repression of *Solidarność* did not entirely halt environmental activism. Environmentalists, not viewed as subversive, served to showcase the regime's supposed liberalism and modernizing claims. The authorities thus permitted certain environmental organizations to continue operating, even under authoritarian conditions⁵³.

4.2 The Żarnowiec controversy

The Polish environmental movement embraced the anti-nuclear cause. Although construction of the Żarnowiec plant began in 1981, protests intensified by 1984-85, as several organizations joined forces. This loose coalition included the anarchist and punk-inspired Alternative Society Movement (RSA); the St. Francis of Assisi Environmental Movement (REFA); the youth organization I Prefer to Be; the Freedom and Peace Movement (*Wolność i Pokój*) and the Polish Ecological Club⁵⁴.

Even *Solidarność*, now operating underground, developed an ecological committee but prioritized economic modernization over environmental concerns. As Szulecka and Szulecki (2017) have observed, by the early 1980s, “environmental issues also seemed to constitute a dividing line, separating two generations of the democratic opposition”⁵⁵. Despite their small numbers, activists mobilized affected communities through protests, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. These quasi-spontaneous protests brought together residents, activists, and members of the academic community.

The first factor fuelling the mobilization was the prohibitive and opaque costs associated with the plant's construction, coupled with concerns that the facility would deepen Poland's dependence on the Soviet Union, then its sole energy provider. Activists also criticized the poor engineering standards of Polish experts and the

⁵⁰ Kramer, J. P. (1987). The environmental crisis in Poland. In H. Schreiber (Ed.), *Environmental protection in Eastern Europe*. <https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/pdf/1986/iug-pre86-14.pdf>; Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2017). *Polish environmental movement 1980-2017*.

⁵¹ Fura, Z. (1985). Institutions: The Polish Ecology Club. *Environment*, 9, 4-5.

⁵² Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2022). Between domestic politics and ecological crises: (De)legitimization of Polish environmentalism. *Environmental Politics*, 31(7), 1214-1243.

⁵³ Gliński, P., & Koziarek, M. (2007). *Nature protection NGOs in Poland*.

⁵⁴ Piotrowski, G. (2015). *The "other" democratization in Poland*; Ślimko, E., & Jaromi, S. (2020). Being an environmentalist among Catholics... The School of Integral Ecology Leaders and other initiatives of the St. Francis of Assisi Environmental Movement (REFA). *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae*, 18(1), 73-84.

⁵⁵ Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2017). *Polish environmental movement 1980-2017*.

absence of reliable safety guarantees or risk-management protocols. As Kacper Szulecki and Janusz Waluszko report, Jacek Czaputowicz questioned whether a system unable to build basic infrastructure could ensure nuclear safety⁵⁶. Moreover, the site's proximity to Gdańsk and other densely populated areas was widely deemed inappropriate.

The 1986 Chernobyl disaster gave new momentum to the movement. Disillusioned citizens protested the Żarnowiec plant, linking it to Soviet nuclear failures. A public demonstration in Wrocław attracted approximately 10,000 participants. The first anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster sparked further protests in Gdańsk, Kraków, and other cities⁵⁷. Sit-ins became increasingly common, and some activists sought to involve *Solidarność* and the Catholic Church to amplify criticism of the regime on the environmental issue⁵⁸. Meanwhile, anti-nuclear protests expanded to other prospective sites, such as Kopań and Klempicz, where nuclear installations were being considered. One of the most evocative demonstrations occurred in March 1986, just a month after the Chernobyl disaster. In response to the authorities' silence, WiP organized a march featuring women pushing strollers to highlight nuclear risks to children. As a scholar recalled, "the crowd walked holding placards such as 'Why were we informed so late?' and 'We demand powdered milk for all the children'"⁵⁹. This protest constituted an emotional rebuke of the authorities' delayed response, underscoring the lack of transparency and accountability.

4.3 Environmentalism and the democratic transition

Environmental activists took part in the Round Table negotiations that launched Poland's democratic transition. Various environmental groups joined scientists at the environmental sub-table, which reached consensus on 27 issues – excluding nuclear energy, where the government remained firm⁶⁰.

The most innovative initiative led by environmental activists was the organization of a "social referendum" in the Gdańsk region with nearly one million votes, framing their struggle as a question of civic and democratic legitimacy. This initiative built upon the momentum following the semi-free elections of June 1989. The proposal for a referendum was launched in January 1990 and was even debated in the Polish Parliament. MP Antoni Furtak defended the referendum, calling the hunger strike a reminder of politicians' duty to heed public will and denouncing censorship-like information blackouts⁶¹. The Mazowiecki government rejected the proposal as "undemocratic"⁶², while his deputy warned that approving the referendum might encourage further protests⁶³ and abandoned the idea of a national vote. Instead, activists organized a "social referendum," held on the same day as the municipal elections in May 1990, supported by various civil society actors. Within one week, 599 referendum committees and polling stations were set up. Though turnout was insufficient, 86% opposed the plant, signaling strong local resistance and support for public participation.

An international campaign by Greenpeace and the European Greens in 1990, with petitions and protests across Europe, dealt the final blow to the Żarnowiec project. In September 1990, Greenpeace activists occupied the Polish embassy in Sweden, prompting Mazowiecki to declare a moratorium on nuclear development⁶⁴.

Meanwhile, the influence of the environmental movement extended beyond the anti-nuclear campaign. In 1991, shortly after the first fully democratic elections, despite the poor electoral performance of the Green Party, the government introduced innovative environmental policy instruments, including the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management, the state-owned Bank for Environmental Protection,

⁵⁶ Szulecki, K., Borewicz, T., & Waluszko, J. (2015). A brief green moment: The emergence and decline of the Polish anti-nuclear and environmental movement. *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*, 7(2), 27-48.

⁵⁷ Kenney, P. (2002). *A carnival of revolution: Central Europe 1989* (p. 72). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁵⁸ Borewicz, T., Szulecki, K., & Waluszko, J. (2022). *The Chernobyl effect: Antinuclear protests and the molding of Polish democracy, 1986–1990*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2017). *Polish environmental movement 1980-2017*.

⁶¹ Borewicz, T., Szulecki, K., & Waluszko, J. (2022). *The Chernobyl effect*.

⁶² Piotrowski, G. (2015). *The "other" democratization in Poland*.

⁶³ Borewicz, T., Szulecki, K., & Waluszko, J. (2022). *The Chernobyl effect*.

⁶⁴ Piotrowski, G. (2015). *The "other" democratization in Poland*.



and the EcoFund.⁶⁵

The broad mobilization of the late 1980s yielded three significant outcomes. First, it halted the completion of the nuclear power plant. Second, it contributed to the delegitimization of the communist regime by introducing democratic practices and discourse, combining environmentalism, human rights, peace activism, and participatory governance⁶⁶. In this way, the anti-nuclear coalition offered an alternative both to the government and to the main opposition force, Solidarity. Third, despite electoral setbacks, it helped shape key concepts and instruments for environmental governance in Poland's new democratic context.

⁶⁵ Szulecka, J., & Szulecki, K. (2017). *Polish environmental movement 1980-2017*.

⁶⁶ Corry, O. (2014). The green legacy of 1989: Revolutions, environmentalism and the global age. *Political Studies*, 62(2), 309-325.

5. From Local Struggles to the European Arena

5.1 The roots of European environmentalism: local struggle and transnational horizons in the 1970s

Understanding the construction of a European environmental policy requires close attention to the crucial role played by civil society and its relationship to the byzantine institutional system of the EC/EU. From the 1970s onward, European environmentalism emerged as a collective response to a growing awareness of a systemic crisis, one that threatened to undermine the very model of development on which the economic growth of major Western European countries had been based. Long before it became the object of Community regulation, the environment was politicized through the mobilization of citizens, associations, local committees, and transnational networks. These actors sought to challenge the foundations of industrial development and economic integration by demanding new safeguards, new rights, and a fundamental reform of decision-making processes. It is within this context that one of the most significant trajectories of European integration took shape: the slow and non-linear construction of an environmental governance that was not granted from above but forged under pressure from grassroots and radical cultural demands.

European environmentalism emerged on the margins of institutions as a diffuse, fragmented force. From the late 1960s, local conflicts in Western Europe erupted over pollution, land use, and later, nuclear energy. This was the era of “ecological protest,” expressed through civic committees, campaigns against waste disposal sites or industrial plants, and public health initiatives often supported by critical scientists or activist doctors.

Although initially localized, these initiatives began to coalesce into more structured movements, giving rise to national and eventually transnational networks. Growing awareness that environmental issues transcended national borders, ranging from air pollution and pesticides to river basin contamination, led activists, researchers, and associations to increasingly address European institutions, which were already perceived as a potential space for political dialogue. This marked a shift from reactive protest to a proactive political subject⁶⁷. This evolution was further spurred by the crisis of faith in the ideal of limitless progress that had underpinned industrial modernity. Events like the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the oil shocks, the debate around the Club of Rome, and the Seveso disaster, spurred reflection and environmental politicization⁶⁸. This process called into question the paradigms of growth, technical authority, and the Fordist social compromise⁶⁹.

New forms of transnational activism also began to emerge. Groups such as *Friends of the Earth*, the European Environmental Bureau, Greenpeace and early green networks in Western Europe drove this shift. These networks not only shared knowledge but also developed joint documents, cross-border strategies, and tools for exerting pressure on Community institutions, anticipating dynamics that would become central in the decades to follow. A new culture linked ecology with democracy, feminism, pacifism, and intergenerational justice⁷⁰. This capacity for hybridization and for linking diverse causes through the ecological nexus became one of the defining features that allowed environmental movements to resonate with ever broader sectors of European society⁷¹.

At the Community level, although the 1957 Treaty of Rome did not grant explicit competence in environmental matters, the European Communities began to adopt ad hoc environmental measures in the 1960s based on Articles 100 and 235, which allowed institutional intervention in areas not covered by the treaties if necessary to ensure the functioning of the internal market. Growing concern in the 1970s pushed some MEPs to link

⁶⁷ Knill, C., & Liefferink, J. D. (2011). *Environmental politics in the European Union: Policy-making, implementation and patterns of multi-level governance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁶⁸ Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., & Behrens III, W. W. (1972). *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. New York: Universe Books.

⁶⁹ Doherty, B. (2016). *Ideas and actions in the green movement*. London: Routledge.

⁷⁰ Haigh, N. (2016). *EU environmental policy: Its journey to centre stage*. New York: Routledge.

⁷¹ McCormick, J. (1995). *The global environmental movement*. Chichester: Wiley.

environmental and workplace conditions⁷². By the mid-1970s, the EEC adopted environmental directives and the first Environmental Action Programme amid mounting grassroots pressure. Nevertheless, environmental policy remained largely subordinate to the priorities of the internal market. Meanwhile, environmentalism intensified its political engagement. The rise of green parties from 1980 institutionalized ecological conflict, alongside continued direct action and public engagement.

Within this framework, anti-nuclear mobilization emerged as a key fault line. However, it is important to note that opposition to nuclear power did not exhaust the scope of European environmentalism. Anti-nuclear discourse was part of a broader critique of centralized energy, calling for renewables and new ecological rights⁷³.

Relations with European institutions also became more structured: environmental groups received EU funding, while the Parliament and DG XI began engaging more with ecological debates. These modest but crucial steps brought ecology onto the EU agenda, thanks, above all, to persistent civil society efforts.

5.2 From the Environmental Action Programme to the Second Seveso Directives

The first Environmental Action Programme (1973–1977) set general objectives: pollution control, sustainable resource use, urban impact mitigation, and cooperation with third countries. Its eleven guiding principles included prevention and the polluter-pays approach. Yet, it took a corrective, *ex post* view of pollution. Delegating implementation to Member States hindered harmonisation and excluded community involvement or democratic control of sites affected by industrial pollution, even at the level of the European Parliament, which was not yet directly elected.

The Seveso disaster, coinciding with the end of the first EAP, prompted calls – especially from Italy – for coordinated European action. Public pressure, galvanized by demands for transparency and future safety guarantees, further reinforced political interest in the issue. The European Commission soon recognized the absence of adequate regulations governing the production of environmentally hazardous chemicals. It also concluded that the existing Environmental Action Programme framework was inadequate for responding to a crisis of Seveso's magnitude. As Commissioner Scarascia Mugnozza warned, Seveso was more than an accident – it signaled systemic risks from unchecked chemical production. In another speech, he also stressed that European institutions were not deaf to public concerns, and polls confirmed rising environmental awareness among European citizens⁷⁴.

These developments led to the Second Environmental Action Programme (1977–1981) and, most notably, to the adoption of the so-called Seveso Directive. The new EAP linked quality of life and environmental protection to sustainable growth. Among other priorities, it sought to institutionalize preventive environmental policies. One chapter was devoted entirely to environmental impact assessments, considered an essential tool for industrial development projects – though, at the time, these provisions largely remained on paper.

The 1982 Seveso Directive addressed hazardous industrial risks, explicitly recognizing environmental danger⁷⁵. It required operators to prevent accidents and limit damage from hazardous industrial activities. In terms of prevention, the Directive took up one of the demands that emerged among citizens after the Seveso disaster and encouraged the dissemination of information on accidents across the Community to improve monitoring and limit potential harm. Yet responsibility for implementation remained with member states⁷⁶.

⁷² See, for example, Oerle, A. P., Boersma, J., & Armengaud, A. (1970-1972). Parliamentary interventions. In *European Parliament, Debates* (Sessions of 6 October 1970; 19 November 1970; 18 April 1972).

⁷³ Carter, N. (2018). *The politics of the environment: Ideas, activism, policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁴ Scarascia Mugnozza, C. (1976). *Seveso. Intervento al Parlamento europeo; Discorso pronunciato alla Conferenza europea dei ministri per la pianificazione regionale, Bari, 22 ottobre 1976*. Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU), CSM 65.

⁷⁵ Council of the European Communities. (1982, June 24). *Directive 82/501/EEC*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

Despite its importance, industry feared above all the high costs, while activists criticised the vague application and lack of public involvement. In particular, Article 8 on information was weak, neither guaranteeing regular disclosure nor encouraging independent campaigns by civil society. Consequently, a vast, if uncoordinated, campaign targeting EC institutions emerged, highlighting the many shortcomings of the Seveso Directive regarding the public's right to know.⁷⁷ A 1996 revision of the Directive mandated regular, accessible updates, public consultation on land use, and citizen input in emergency planning. Further improvements – many of them reflecting civil society pressure – included the specification that information must be updated every three years (or sooner if conditions changed), public consultation on land-use planning related to hazardous facilities, and citizen involvement in emergency planning⁷⁸.

5.3 Between mobilization and institutions

The Chernobyl disaster marked a turning point, exposing the limits of European environmental policy and revealing the transnational nature of ecological risks. Radiation fallout, food contamination, scientific uncertainty, and opaque communication affected all member states of the European Community simultaneously, demonstrating that environmental issues transcend administrative borders and that risk management could no longer be the exclusive responsibility of national authorities. The EC's delayed response spurred civil society mobilisation, demanding transparency, binding standards, and public involvement.

In March 1987, a British National Radiological Protection Board report revealed wide disparities in radioactive exposure across Europe and alarming thyroid doses in children, fuelling public concern. It represented one of the first systematic scientific assessments of the incident's effects on the European population⁷⁹. Based on environmental monitoring data from across the continent, the report highlighted wide disparities in radioactive exposure: from minimal levels in Portugal (0.3 microsieverts) to high readings in West Germany, Italy, and Greece (300–500), with peaks between 2,000 and 4,000 microsieverts in zones of concentrated fallout. Though it advanced no specific policy recommendations, the report clearly illustrated the territorial inequalities of exposure and the lack of a unified Community response. Findings concerning thyroid doses in children, estimated to be up to ten times higher than whole-body averages, were particularly alarming. Publicised by a technical body under Commission mandate, these data quickly became tools of grassroots mobilisation, providing a scientific basis for consumer campaigns and for anti-nuclear activism in the months that followed⁸⁰.

Between 1987 and 1988, a new form of transnational cooperation emerged among associations, ecological movements, and networks of experts, seeking to address the shortcomings of European nuclear risk policy. One key document from this period is the *Déclaration commune de groupes de personnes [...] concernant l'information immédiate des populations en cas d'accidents nucléaires*, signed by numerous civil society organisations from France, Belgium, Germany, and beyond. The text criticised IAEA conventions and called for real-time public alerts and pre-set safety protocols. The signatories demanded real-time transparency during nuclear incidents, simultaneous public access to the same information provided to the IAEA, and the pre-establishment of "protection and care instructions for use by the population." This declaration marked a crucial moment in the politicisation of environmental safety. It proposed civic alert networks and anticipated a model of "counter-security" based on distributed knowledge and collective action. In this sense, the document anticipated the concept of "counter-security" developed by European environmentalism in

⁷⁷ See, for example, HAEU, LN-6. (1984, May). *Petition from the Lombard mayors enclosed to "Piccole e medie imprese nell'economia europea degli anni '90"*.

⁷⁸ Walker, G., Simmons, P., Irwin, A., & Wynne, B. (1999). Risk communication, public participation, and the Seveso II directive. *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, 65, 179-190.

⁷⁹ This is not to say that there had not been any up to that time; on the contrary, the scientific community immediately took action with studies and publications. See, by way of example only, a contribution that rigorously describes the geographical extent and intensity of radioactive contamination, calling out the urgency of a coordinated policy response, criticizing the shortcomings of monitoring and public communication. See Loprieno, N. (1986, October 1). Radiation knows no frontiers. *EER*, 2-9.

⁸⁰ HAEU, BEUC. (1987, March 23). *Activities, campaigns by BEUC and member associations – Food safety: food contamination by radioactive fall-out in Chernobyl, NRPB – First assessment of the effects of the Chernobyl accident on Europe*, b. 256.

subsequent years, envisioning a bottom-up form of governance based on transparency, cross-border cooperation, and shared responsibility. These civic networks aimed to overcome the fragmented regulatory landscape of Europe and to establish a new standard of protection: no longer delegated solely to national technical agencies but co-produced through collective initiative and distributed knowledge.

On the first anniversary of the disaster, Martin Abraham, head of information and research at the International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU) denounced government opacity and regulatory failure. A year after Chernobyl, no common European thresholds for radioactivity in food existed. Diverging national limits had generated confusion, inequality, and insecurity among consumers. The lack of harmonisation hindered a coordinated response and further eroded trust in European institutions, which were accused of failing to issue timely, binding directives⁸¹. Uneven national limits caused confusion and unsafe food circulation, highlighting the absence of a unified protective framework. The IOCU stressed the negative consequences of economic integration absent shared protection mechanisms. It issued a strong accusation: that the Community had failed to guarantee even minimal standards for environmental and food safety, despite mounting evidence of risk⁸².

The ensuing European debate on setting common thresholds for food radioactivity provoked complex and divergent positions. West Germany supported the EC proposal, though thresholds were higher than previous national limits⁸³. BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) condemned the scientific basis and urged stricter, child-focused standards. BUND advocated for an alternative model: radiobiologically determined thresholds, not economically derived ones, with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women. These differing cases, though distinct in tone and method, both illustrate a broader attempt to challenge the Community's handling of radiological risk, characterised by political compromises and overreliance on opaque predictive models. The tension between precautionary logic and technical "normalisation" of food contamination became one of the defining dilemmas of Europe's post-Chernobyl risk culture.

A middle ground was expressed by the German Alternative Commission on Radiation, composed of independent scientists and activists, who argued that the proposed tolerance levels were incompatible with the latest scientific evidence on the long-term effects of low-dose radiation, calling for the adoption of more reliable detection methods and the inclusion of independent experts in decision-making processes. There is a clear attempt by scientists to carve out an autonomous space for themselves, resisting both institutional technocracy and militant activism⁸⁴.

What ultimately emerged was a kind of "anarchy" in food contamination limits, the absence of a coherent European strategy and discontent with the Commission's proposals, which were accused of yielding to pressure from certain Member States. Particularly worrying was the increase in maximum limits for iodine, strontium, plutonium and caesium, introduced without new scientific evidence to support them. The European Consumer Organisation (Bureau européen des unions de consommateurs, BEUC) warned that, for children, these levels could lead to annual doses ten times higher than those recommended by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), calling for a coordinated and transparent European protection system based on the precautionary principle and genuine public accountability. This form of pressure helped shift the debate on nuclear safety from a purely technical-administrative issue to a more openly political and participatory arena, in which organised citizens have played a leading role.

5.4 From conflict to governance

The Chernobyl accident marked a turning point: the transnational nature of environmental risks became concrete, and movements denounced institutional failures and pushed the EC to act. In this context,

⁸¹ Webb, R. E. (1986). Chernobyl: What could have happened. *The Ecologist* (UK), Special Issue.

⁸² HAEU, BEUC. (1987, April 26). *Consumer Interpol Memo, allegati a) e d)*, b. 256.

⁸³ Bundesregierung. (1987). *Antwort auf die Kleine Anfrage* (BT-Drucks. 11/5701).

⁸⁴ HAEU, BEUC. (1987, October 6). *German alternative Radiation Commission*, b. 256.

environmental movements adopted a dual strategy: on the one hand, they denounced the failure to protect citizens; on the other, they exerted systematic pressure on European institutions, urging them to move beyond regulatory ambiguity and to recognize environment and public health as political priorities. The first, albeit partial, responses came in 1987 with the definition of “maximum acceptable levels” of food contamination and the establishment of technical advisory panels that included experts from civil society organizations.

In the late 1980s, civic actors shifted focus to long-term goals: harmonized rules, transparency, and participatory governance. The pressure exerted by these transnational expert networks resulted in proposals that anticipated principles later enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty. The focus was no longer solely on protest, but on producing expertise, tools, and knowledge, a paradigm shift from risk management to the progressive elimination of hazards at their source. In this spirit, a 17-point policy document of the European Commission proposed uniform contamination limits, mandatory alerts, a solidarity fund, and civil society involvement in nuclear policy. This context fostered support for a European Environment Agency. In 1989, Delors linked environmental policy to EU legitimacy and proposed a monitoring system as precursor to the Agency, aligned with Single Act principles and youth-targeted education. The proposal thus responded to a need for internal coherence while also reinvigorating the idea of Europe as an actor in the global governance of environmental challenges⁸⁵.

The path to the creation of the European Environment Agency involved a dense sequence of meetings, negotiations, and preparatory documents. In October 1989, Commissioner Carlo Ripa di Meana and German MEP Beata Weber debated the Agency’s mandate: he envisioned a technical-scientific body supporting EU policies, while she emphasized independence, public trust, and civil society participation⁸⁶. The EEA was established in 1990 and was operational by 1994, with a technical role: collecting and harmonizing environmental data. Its 1995 Dobříš Assessment provided a systemic overview of Europe’s environment and informed future policy⁸⁷.

Delors viewed the environment as key to EU cohesion and global governance, promoting carbon taxation and sustainability in the White Paper. Yet NGOs criticized its conventional approach, lack of green job policies, and timid energy tax proposal. Yet he defended the White Paper as pragmatic, arguing the CO₂ tax could fund reductions in labor costs for low-wage employment and align structural funds with ecological objectives⁸⁸.

5.5 Civic roots and Institutional routes: rethinking Europe’s ecological transition

Between the 1970s and 1990s, bottom-up mobilization shaped multilevel political influence, though not linearly. Its success hinged on alliances, alternative knowledge, and institutional legitimacy, often balancing radicalism and adaptation.

After Chernobyl, civic and scientific networks, local movements, and transnational organizations denounced European shortcomings and demanded regulation based on transparency, accountability, and citizen protection, grounded in data and normative alternatives. Their interventions were not mere emotional reactions, but political acts rooted in documentation, data, and alternative normative visions, capable of challenging the cognitive monopoly of official experts and state agencies.

The institutionalization of these demands marked a critical turning point: not only because it introduced a

⁸⁵ Delors, J. (1989, January 17). *Address given to the European Parliament. Bulletin of the European Communities*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. Retrieved from <http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address-given-by-jacques-delors-to-the-european-parliament-17-january-1989-enb9c06b95-db97-4774-a700-e8aea5172233.html>.

⁸⁶ HAEU, AEE. (1989–1990). *Founding of the Agency – Briefing note. Mr Ripa di Meana’s forthcoming meeting with Mrs Beata Weber – rapporteur*, b. 304.

⁸⁷ Stanners, D., & Bourdeau, P. (1995). *Europe’s environment: The Dobříš assessment*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

⁸⁸ HAEU, Delors, J. (1994, February 1). *Entretien de Jacques Delors avec les ONGs sur l’environnement (Bruxelles)*. Troisième Commission Delors, b. 1887.



permanent technical infrastructure, but also because it inaugurated a new mode of governance based on cooperation, comparable information, and public access to environmental data. The 1995 Dobříš Assessment tested this approach. What emerges from this account confirms the importance of ecological citizenship and the need for behavioural change⁸⁹. Yet, institutional integration risks diluting the ecological paradigm into technocratic routines⁹⁰.

This research confirms the complex entanglement between environmental movements and EU policy. Especially in crises, civil society shifted agendas and created space for neglected issues. At the same time, activist-scientist collaboration produced hybrid knowledge – socially urgent and scientifically credible – that shaped continental priorities. The experience gained in this context offers a fundamental lesson: the ecological transition, if it is also to be a democratic transition, must preserve its civic and conflictual roots. Technical efficiency alone is not sufficient; it is essential to safeguard and renew the capacity for critique, social imagination, and widespread mobilization-elements that have historically made European environmentalism a vital force.

The memory of environmental struggles is not merely a testimony of the past, but should be understood as an active resource for the present and the future. It constitutes not only a symbolic repertoire but also a concrete source of practices, tools, and languages capable of reactivating civic participation, redefining the relationship between knowledge and power, and making institutions more responsive to the ecological and democratic needs of contemporary European society.

⁸⁹ Carter, N. (2018). *The politics of the environment*, p. 65.

⁹⁰ Blühdorn, I. (2012). *Post-ecologist politics: Social theory and the abdication of the ecologist paradigm*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

6. Conclusions

The agendas of the mobilisations and movements examined did not directly anticipate the current debate on climate justice. Nonetheless, they provided a fundamental impetus for a new awareness of the connection between environment and democracy. In this sense, environmentalist mobilisations contributed to the renewal of democratic practices by promoting and strengthening citizen participation in decision-making processes. These movements gave voice and representation to individuals and communities whose ability to influence collective decisions was weak or non-existent. In all the case studies, they succeeded in articulating citizens' demands, representing their interests and, to varying degrees, influencing public decisions. While in the German and Polish contexts this representative capacity emerged relatively clearly, in Italy it required a more complex process, in which Legambiente progressively established itself as an actor capable of promoting constant mobilisation, spreading an environmentalist culture, and exerting influence at the political and institutional level.

Another significant contribution to democratic renewal came from the production of new forms of knowledge. On the one hand, the mobilisations engaged the scientific expertise of technicians and specialists, generating alternative and reliable information; on the other hand, they valued local and traditional knowledge, amplifying the voices of the communities involved. The direct testimonies collected in Seveso, Gorleben, and Żarnowiec offered new perspectives on environmental disasters, underlining the urgency not only of corrective measures but also of preventive ones.

In all the case studies, environmental movements also exercised a function of civic monitoring over political decision-makers. In this way, they exerted pressure on public institutions and major polluting companies, raising the issue of administrative transparency and questioning decision-making processes that were opaque, centralised, and often removed from democratic oversight.

Thirdly, through traditional actions – such as sit-ins, marches, and leaflet distribution – and more creative initiatives, environmentalist movements experimented with alternative forms of direct democracy. In the Polish case, these mobilisations also contributed to the country's democratic transition. The German context presents a particularly significant example with the experience of the Free Republic of Wendland in 1980: a self-managed and autonomous community that lasted 33 days and concretely embodied the ideal of direct democracy. Despite its brief duration, this experience assumed strong symbolic value and attracted the attention of media and movements at the transnational level. In Poland, in addition to contributing to the democratisation process, environmental activism promoted the organisation of a regional referendum in Gdańsk in 1990 on the future of the nuclear power plant.

Two further areas show how the environmentalist mobilisations of the 1970s and 1980s influenced democratic renewal. Firstly, these movements acted as true ecological lobbies at the local, national, and European levels. This lobbying activity proved particularly effective in Germany, where it led to the blocking of nuclear projects, the founding of the Green Party, and influenced the development of the energy transition policy (Energiewende). In Poland, the movements were actively involved in the post-communist democratic transition. In Italy, on the other hand, local and national institutions were more reluctant to engage with the proposals put forward by the movements. It was at the European level that the influence of environmentalist actors proved most significant, contributing decisively to the adoption of the Seveso Directives and the creation of the European Environment Agency (EEA).

These mobilisations played a central role in the birth of green parties. By the mid-1980s, environmentalist parties were active both in Italy and Germany, while in Poland a green party was founded that took part in the 1990 elections.

Finally, environmental movements acted as agents of politicization and contestation. They questioned not only specific decisions but the very structures and principles on which decision-making processes are based. They produced counter-narratives, destabilized the presumed neutrality of expertise, and opened new spaces for deliberation. However, this politicizing function was often defused by institutional responses that translated claims into technical norms without addressing their transformative potential, especially at the European level. The creation of European environmental governance thus represents both an achievement and a missed



opportunity: the movements managed to bring environmental issues to the center of public and political attention, but were largely excluded from the architecture that followed.

In conclusion, environmental movements between the 1970s and 1990s played a crucial role in redefining democratic practices in Europe. They made ignored risks visible, challenged institutional opacity, and proposed new models of participation and knowledge. Their success lies not only in the political results achieved but in having redefined what it means to democratically govern the environment. However, their transformative potential was only partially realized, limited by the resilience of technocratic governance, the power of large industrial and energy lobbies, and the institutional marginalization of civic actors. Nonetheless, their legacy endures: in the imaginaries they helped shape, in the standards they imposed, in environmental and sustainability education that is now part of everyday life for European citizens – especially the youth – and in the democratic demands they forcefully placed on the public agenda.



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