

Daniel Cohn-Bendit in front of solar panels during his 2009 electoral campaign.
(Photo by Frank Perry/AFP/GettyImages.)



ALTERNATIVE ENERGY

Green Ideas From Europe

by Robert Collier

The lack of American leadership on environment and climate change has created a power vacuum that many are hoping Europe will fill and Latin America will emulate. But after championing the Kyoto Protocol and taking the lead on action against global warming, European Union nations have been struggling to turn their good intentions into viable climate policies.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the leader of Europe's Greens, says that while European integration is still a model for the world, it is weakening steadily. During a visit to the Center for Latin American Studies on September 29, Cohn-Bendit said that despite what he called Europe's unwillingness to buck U.S. power, it had the potential to join with Latin America to pursue multilateralism and low-carbon energy policies.

"The Europeans with Latin America have to start what could be a feasible coalition with feasible laws that they can reach," he told an audience of about 300. "The problem of this is [whether] the Europeans, in contradiction with what happened in Copenhagen, are really ready to organize themselves, to take the lead in the discussion, not just wait for the American president."

Cohn-Bendit's prescription was a sign that as the United States remains wracked with indecision about how — or whether — to do anything about climate change, Europe is having its own moments of angst.

He sharply criticized Europe's failure to break from Uncle Sam's embrace and take the lead in the UN

climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009.

"In Copenhagen, the big negotiations on climate, it was a catastrophe," he said. "Why? Because the Europeans didn't have the guts, the organization to lead. The Americans — Obama was afraid of Congress, so he didn't do anything. The Chinese — even if they do [support a common climate strategy], they had one idea — that whatever we do, nobody can and should control us."

Cohn-Bendit is one of the most iconic, cosmopolitan figures of the European left, playing a key role in both France and Germany.

He was born in 1945 in southern France to German-Jewish parents who had fled Nazism. Later, as an anarchist student leader in Paris, he became one of the central figures in the Paris student uprising and general strike of 1968. He was widely known

as "Dany le Rouge" — "Danny the Red" — a description of both his politics and his red hair. The French government attempted to expel him from the country, leading students to take up the chant, "*Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands*" ("We are all German Jews").

In the following years, he settled in Germany and became a leader of that country's "autonomist" movement, which blended anarchism and Marxism. Since 1994, Cohn-Bendit has been elected alternately as European Parliament representative of the German Greens, then the French Greens, and once again the German Greens — the only person to have been elected to that body from more than one country.

Along the way, Cohn-Bendit managed to anger both the right and left wings for his mix of radicalism and realism — from the right, for his

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Daniel Cohn-Bendit addresses a 1968 meeting at the Gare de l'Est, Paris.



Photo by AFP/Getty Images.



Photo courtesy of Stan Oshinsky.

A ThyssenKrupp facility in Germany covered in thin-film solar material.

backing of open immigration, the legalization of soft drugs and the abandonment of nuclear power, and from the left for his support for free-market economic policies and for European military intervention in Bosnia and Afghanistan.

Currently known as “Danny the Green,” he is co-president of the European Greens/European Free Alliance in the European Parliament. Yet he told his Berkeley audience that he is disappointed at Europe’s decision to bow to pressure from industrial lobbies by creating a cap-and-trade system that affects only the power-generating sector rather than all business sectors. He was quizzed pointedly about this and other European weaknesses from questioners posting via Internet.

“We are in the fringe of a backlash,” he admitted in response to a question from Rafael Fernández de Castro, special adviser for international affairs to Mexican President Felipe Calderón. “The big corporations and trade unions are working together to say, ‘the crisis is too big, we have first to resolve the economic and financial crisis, and then we will see what we can do to resolve the ecological crisis.’ I think this is a danger.”

Cohn-Bendit cast the stakes in dire terms:

It’s insane logic. I think that in the climate crisis, with the ecological crisis, we are slowly understanding that our way of production, our

way of economy, is destroying the planet. If we destroy the planet, what will be the end?

Cohn-Bendit echoed his own uneasy experience trying to act as a bridge between radical and environmentalist wings of the French-German left. “With the ecological crisis, the mantra of the workers movement has to change,” he said. “And because there are jobs that people have that they will lose. And their way of production is changing ... coal mines, and all the ‘green coal’ rhetoric, also from Obama, is rubbish. Green coal doesn’t exist. Coal is black. Nobody has seen green coal. Neither has Obama.”

He cast Europe’s dilemma as a tug of war between nation-states and regional government on a wide variety of topics.

“With this financial crisis, we must decide: do we have a national strategy of regulation of financial markets or do we have a European strategy? In the ecological crisis, do we have national solutions or do we have a European solution? And with climate change, do we have a national or European solution?”

Cohn-Bendit added that only by regionwide cooperation can the economy be adapted to a high-tech, low-carbon future. “We see in Europe that the green movement’s electoral results are growing. So you have a growing sensitivity in Europe that Europe should take the lead and not permit the backlash. Because the ecological

transformation of the economy is the key of modernity. You will be an industrial leading nation, or part of the world, if you are leading in the ecological industry, because this is the industry of tomorrow.”

Ricardo Lagos, former president of Chile and currently Special Envoy on Climate Change for the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, sent a question asking whether Europe is truly capable of reaching its current climate commitments, known as the “three 20s” — increasing energy efficiency by 20 percent, reducing greenhouse gases by 20 percent and increasing renewable energy generation by 20 percent, all by the year 2020.

“Our position in the European Greens is that Europe is capable of doing the three 30s,” Cohn-Bendit said. “This is the fight that we have with the majority of European governments now. They say we can go to three-30 [only] if the rest of world will go to this, too. And our argument is that Europe, with the United States, is one of the most responsible for the climate problem, so we should go to three-30. And if we go to three-30, we will have the influence we need to push the Americans and others to go more rapidly.”

But Daniel Kammen, a professor in UC Berkeley’s Energy and Resources Group and now the World Bank’s newly

appointed chief of renewable energy and energy efficiency, pressed Cohn-Bendit on whether his three-30 vision was politically feasible.

“I want a carbon tax,” Cohn-Bendit replied, mentioning the measure that many policy experts on both sides of the Atlantic view as most efficient at cutting emissions, yet one that remains politically unpalatable. “Europe has to impose a carbon tax. The more you produce carbon, you have to pay your tax. This is the way of regulation. A carbon tax will push in Europe [carbon] reduction.” But he admitted that such policies would require a seismic shift in European politics.

“This is a political decision,” he said, emphasizing his hope that the expected national elections in France and Germany in 2012 and 2013, respectively, will result in left-Green coalition governments that would forcefully advocate for European adoption of a carbon tax and more aggressive emissions targets.

Cohn-Bendit accused the United States of resting on the laurels of its military-space accomplishments and allowing other nations to take the lead in developing clean technology industries.

“The United States, in all military technology you are at the top of the world, but in the rest, you are a third-world country,” he said. “This is what I want to explain to

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[Windmills stand alongside nuclear power plants in France’s Tricastin Nuclear Power Center.](#)



Photo by Jean-Louis Zimmermann.

the United States: you are completely backwards. If you [want to] have high-speed trains, you will buy them from France or Germany or China, but they won't be American. Because you lived 30 years on the moon. You only got there once, you know, but you stayed there."

Cohn-Bendit did not spare Latin American governments from his criticism, however.

"One of the big problems of Latin America is that the leading nations, on one side, they have taken ecological steps, they did it on the Amazon, but on the other side, like biofuels, they got completely mad. In Latin America, because you have countries like Venezuela with a lot of oil, the countries didn't get to [the] core of the problem, with some exceptions like Costa Rica."

Responding to a question from Martha Delgado, the environment policy chief of Mexico City, he also offered hope for autonomous action by city governments around the world. Cohn-Bendit advocated a "coalition of the cities for reduction of emission of CO₂" He added, "if this coalition continues and the cities gave common benchmarks, it is one of the possibilities of arriving to global reduction of emissions."

But despite his biting critiques of governments in Europe and around the world, Cohn-Bendit waxed lyrical about the potential of multinational integration.

The European integration process is a "dream of rivers," Cohn-Bendit said, noting that Europe's first barrier to drop was the Rhine, between historic enemies France and Germany. Then came the Oder, between Germany and Poland. "Now there's not any more a border where people are shot," he said. "You could continue to have this dream, the dream of Bosphorus, to get Turkey in the European Union. This is highly controversial in Europe. But I think that it wasn't Obama who invented 'yes we can,' it was the Europeans. They invented 'yes we can overcome everything.'"

"Why do we need Europe? We need Europe because we need a multilateral world," Cohn-Bendit said. He then concluded his talk on a wistful, ambiguously modest tone.

"So I still think Europe is still a dream. Worthwhile, I hope."

[Daniel Cohn-Bendit is Co-President of the European parliamentary group Greens/European Free Alliance. He spoke for CLAS on September 29, 2010.](#)

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An Italian high-speed train built in Europe.
(Photo by Ciccio Pizzetaro.)