

Matti Vesa Volanen

For the Planet, For the People -The Fourth Left!

Europe's Lefts and the Mediation of the Conditions of
Life

**From the Politics of Fear
to the Politics of Hope and Life**



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Artificial intelligence was used in the preparation of this book.

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Preface - Nature as Co-worker, Ally and Fellow Traveller

Nature is neither a force external to humanity, a stock of raw materials to be controlled, nor merely an object of protection. It is our co-worker, ally and fellow traveller: a condition of life with which, and on whose terms, all human activity takes place. Our bodies, language, work, communities and culture are highly developed forms of nature. The economy, technology and politics can therefore never be detached from nature.

Ecological realism begins with this simple but demanding recognition. Our internal nature - our needs, capacities, desires, care, learning and imagination - and external nature - energy, food, water, land, climate and other species - are always renewed within the same texture of life. When this connection is severed or subordinated to growth, power or profit, the conditions of human life itself become fragile.

This book asks how, in European history, our relationship with nature has been mediated through cities, work, science, technology, the state and markets. The First Left opened up civic freedoms; the Second, the horizon of labour and social justice; the Third, questions of recognition, culture and internal nature. The task of the Fourth Left is not to abandon these achievements, but to bring them together anew on the basis of the conditions of life. The programme of action that concludes the book translates this task into political objectives and initiatives through which shared responsibility for the conditions of life can be put into practice.

This requires commoning reproduction: maintaining, repairing and developing food provision, housing, health, care, education, work, energy, infrastructure, local ecosystems and shared time. Nature as a co-worker does not mean subordinating it to production as an instrument. It means learning from nature's own rhythms, limits and creative possibilities. Nature as an ally means that our security and hope rest not on conquering it, but on building viable relationships. Nature as a fellow traveller reminds us that we travel neither alone nor solely for ourselves.

From this starting point, the task of politics is not to secure life as a by-product of growth. Its task is to make preserving, repairing and developing life's texture a shared purpose - for the planet, for the people.

Pakkala, Vantaa, 22 September 2026

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matti Vesa Volanen'.

Matti Vesa Volanen

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1. Introduction: Mediating the Conditions of Life

This book tells the history of Europe's Lefts differently from conventional histories of their parties or ideas. Its starting point is not primarily how social power, income or identities have been distributed, but what kind of relationship each historical Left has built between internal and external nature. The question is how the conditions of life are mediated.

No social order is realistic if it exhausts its own ecological, social, temporal and institutional conditions of existence.

Ecological realism is not one policy area among others. It is a measure by which every form of politics can be assessed. The economy, technology, social protection, security, education and cultural development, and democracy are realistic only if they maintain and develop the texture of life on which they themselves depend. This texture consists of energy and matter, bodies and care, language and knowledge, work and technology, trust, institutions and the times specific to each of them.

For this reason, nature in this account is not merely an environment, a resource or an object of moral concern. It is a co-worker, ally and fellow traveller. A co-worker because human labour always takes place within nature's material and energetic flows. An ally because human life rests on ecosystems, other species and nature's capacity for renewal. A fellow traveller because we cannot detach ourselves from our home planet, but we can change how we live on it.

The book's historical perspective is European, but it does not treat Europe as self-created or as the measure of the world. Europe's cities, empires, Enlightenment, industrialisation and Lefts emerged through entanglement with colonies, global flows of labour and raw materials, and resistance. European history is thus world-historical, but it is not a universal model for others to repeat.

Three Frameworks

The book is framed by the different but complementary perspectives of Peter Turchin, Wesley J. Wildman and F. LeRon Shults, and Jason W. Moore. Turchin helps us understand the long transformation of the Holocene: how large societies have built capacities for cooperation, organisations, norms and institutions that respond to competitive pressures. His perspective is diagnostic, not normative. It does not tell us what makes a society good, but it helps explain why complex societies require ever more extensive coordination (Turchin 2025).

In Wildman and Shults's model, worldviews, ways of life and civilisations change together. An idea does not influence history on its own; it must acquire an embodied, institutional and technical form. A new understanding of humanity, nature or the good life changes education, work, rituals, cities and tools. At the same time, changing ways of life may compel a reappraisal of a worldview (Wildman and Shults 2024).

Moore's concept of the Capitalocene, in turn, prevents us from explaining the ecological crisis by invoking an abstract 'humanity'. The problem is not that humans in general act within nature, but that capital, empire, class, racialisation, the gendered division of labour, science, technology and the state have organised labour and nature as cheap inputs whose costs can be externalised. The Capitalocene does not replace the Holocene as a geological epoch; it names a historical world-ecology that developed within it (Moore 2015; 2017).

The Politics of Fear, Hope and Life

The mediation of the conditions of life can also be examined through three political logics. The politics of fear builds security around uncertainty, threats, defensive capacity and the balance of power. Its classical form is realism in international relations, in which states are assumed to pursue their own interests and security within a competitive order. The politics of fear can identify real dangers, but it easily reduces security to a question of borders, adversaries and states of exception.

The politics of hope opens up a space of possibility. It seeks to overcome antagonism through trade, institutions, agreements and interdependence. Its strength lies in recognising the possibility of cooperation even when the starting points differ. Its limits become visible when exchange and dependence remain unequal, or when no shared responsibility is assumed for their material and ecological conditions.

The politics of life measures fear and hope against the reproduction of the shared conditions of life. It asks what energy, food, water, soil, care, knowledge, time and ecosystem functioning societies preserve, repair and develop together. Ecological realism provides the basis for assessing this politics: it does not eliminate conflicts, but reveals when their resolution consumes the conditions of its own continuity.

These are not successive historical eras, but simultaneous logics of action whose relative priority is contested within the same society. Fear identifies danger, hope opens up the possibility of change, and life binds both to the maintenance of life's texture. The task of the Fourth Left is to make this ordering democratic, rather than leaving it to markets, competition between states or technical control.

Three Lefts and a Fourth Task

Within this framework, Europe's Lefts appear as three overlapping waves of emancipation. The First Left was the urban bourgeois and radical-liberal civic movement of the nineteenth century. It extended rights, the public sphere, education and parliamentary participation. Its subject was the citizen. At the same time, it took a relative distance from external nature: the urban world began to experience water, food, energy and waste as background conditions mediated through administration or markets.

The Second Left emerged from the organisation of the industrial working population. Its subject was the worker. It showed that formal citizenship is insufficient without social protection, control over working time, the right to organise and the ability to influence production. It extended social solidarity, but often tied

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I am an emeritus educational researcher, doctor of psychology. My research is related to the fourfold division of the European tradition: Schole, Polis, Oikos, Agora and its manifestation in the organization of education in Europe. I have been particularly interested in the mimesis vs. metis division. From this perspective, I assess the limitations of the European Enlightenment in relation to nature, both internal and external, and especially their interrelationship.

