

## DIALOG

*Green analog may be growing in U.S.**Green politics is not like the New Left of the '60s*

By Charlene Spretnak

**D**IANA JOHNSTONE'S REVIEW of *Green Politics* (ITT, Oct. 17, 1984) misrepresented several points. She claimed we fail to acknowledge the positive contribution of those Greens who came from Marxist circles, but on page 21 we state that the large number of Greens from the "nondogmatic left," as the Germans call it, are completely integrated into the party and work hard for Green ideals. It is only the numerically small group-Z Greens (from the "dogmatic left," mainly in Hamburg) who were felt by many Greens all over West Germany to be problematic in the summer of 1983, when the interviews were conducted. (In our book I mentioned the opposition of the "fundamentalists" vs. the "realists," who favor a coalition with the Social Democrats. After our manuscript was finished, this set of alignments became the overshadowing one in the party, with the Group-Z people and the visionary/holistic people now strange bedfellows as the "fundis.")

In her treatment of my American chapter, Johnstone selected only one of the several possible forms suggested for an American Green movement (caucuses) and claimed that to be our entire approach. Regarding my suggestions of Green positions on U.S. policy questions, she reported the opposite of what I actually observe about Reagan's games in Geneva. I point out that no administration has any intention of making arms control proposals that would shut down the fat defense industries and send their two million workers onto the unemployment

rolls. My point in that section is the importance of conversion plans and the necessity to incorporate Green insights into those plans. Finally, because I criticize the typically "bad process" within many parts of the West German Green Party on feminist and other grounds developed in the peace movement, Johnstone concludes that we want only a "tranquil" politics. That, once again, is ridiculous.

Several West German Greens told me during my research that anyone writing

honestly about the ideals and internal process of the Greens had better be prepared for attacks by the right and the left. That is what has happened. The same day I read Johnstone's review someone sent me a newsletter from a conservative institute, the entire issue of which analyzed our book as irrefutable proof of a pending worldwide takeover by the "eco-feminist order," which will destroy the family, private property—and urban civilization! Leftist reviewers have portrayed us as rightwing ideologues and never mention in their reviews the distinctions we make in our book between the "dogmatic" and "nondogmatic" German left and between "anti-Marxist" and "post-Marxist." I suppose we've become targets because we were the first to bring across the Atlantic the news that Green politics is different from New Left

*In Germany, the Green Party has steadily been gaining strength. It has now inspired efforts in this country to create a left alternative politics.*

politics. Our reportage has been judged "an important synthesis and an excellent analysis" by August Haussleiter, a co-founder of the West German Greens who often defends the Group-Z people.

Many Americans from what the Germans would call a "nondogmatic left" background now work in Green organizations such as the Committees of Correspondence, P.O. Box 40040, St. Paul, Minn. 55104, (which Harry Boyte, myself and others co-founded); the Citizens Party; and the North American Green Party (the reincarnated Yippies).

*Charlene Spretnak is co-author with Fritjof Capra of *Green Politics*.*

*New political effort seeks a fusion of "Green" and "populist" themes*

By Harry C. Boyte

**T**WO THEMES ARE IN THE AIR on the American left this fall: the successes of the "Green" parties in Europe have led to speculation about the possibilities of some analogous political force developing here. Simultaneously, as several commentators have observed, "the new populism" of the Congressional Populist Caucus and new Democratic senators emerged from the elections as perhaps the strongest alternative to Reaganism and of those who would move the Democratic Party sharply rightward.

In recent months, a new organizing effort called the Committees of Correspondence has begun to seek a fusion of "Green" and "Populist" themes. The Committees aim at majoritarian political appeal. The effort grows from and seeks to express the values and aspirations of the rich, broad organizing efforts of recent years—the thousands of neighborhood and citizen groups, women's self-help projects, environmental and peace organizations, rural protests and the like.

**An Ecological Perspective.**

In her review (ITT, Oct. 17, 1984) of *Green Politics*, the book by Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra that introduces European Green ideas to an American audience and

points to similar possibilities here, Diana Johnstone raises some of the difficulties facing a new movement and also argues for an approach that a new movement must overcome. On the whole, Johnstone is sharply critical of the book. She credits the authors with providing a "great deal of information about the Greens apparently unavailable elsewhere in the U.S." But she suggests that their "Dick and Jane level of political theory" ignores the role of Marxism specifically and political conflict generally in shaping the German Greens and is mired in hopeless idealism: "They seem to believe that this new ideal [a decentralist world] is on its way because it is being imagined."

Issues of power, class injustice and social conflict—while not ignored by Capra and Spretnak—must indeed inform any serious political challenge to the megastructure of the modern world. And there is no simple format for combining such concerns with the sort of middle-class environmental, feminist and peace groups most immediately attracted to "Green politics," especially as it has been portrayed (often

*Continued on following page*

## DIALOG

Continued from preceding page incorrectly) in the United States. But Johnstone's own prescriptions are simply a formula for political isolation and marginality. In place of Spretnak and Capra's stress on the need for a new ecologically based paradigm, she prefers a left-wing grouping in ecological trappings, based on elements like "The Citizens Party, Third World support groups, radical Catholics and nondogmatic Marxists."

Johnstone excoriates Spretnak and Capra for imagining that one could draw into a new American political movement ordinary "Democrats and Republicans." But precisely the conviction that an ecological perspective allows a way to think about politics—and appeal to diverse groups—across traditional political boundaries furnishes the creative, driving theme of *Green Politics* and the Green political movements, alike. In part, the appeal is immediate and concrete: West German "value conservatives" in rural areas, like young, middle-class professionals, are passionately disturbed by the degradation of the natural world as the price of "progress," conventionally understood. And the concern is far deeper than simply an environmental aesthetic. The destruction of ancient areas like the Black Forest threatens the spiritual and folk cultural wellsprings of Germany, the German people's intricate web of connections with the land and with other life that defines the best of their historical identity. Moreover, the social counterparts of such a concern—proposals for community-based economic life and technology, decentralization of power, an ethic of nonviolence, for example—suggest themes historically characteristic of democratic populist movements.

There are evident differences in "Green" and "Populist" approaches. The one begins with the estrangement of humans from the natural world, the other with the alienation of the individual from human community and historical identities; "Green politics" finds its most immediate constituency in middle-class, technical and professional groups, Populism in poor,



working-class and minority areas. But both share an organic conception of politics and political action that creates broad areas of value agreement. Moreover, while the German Greens, in the aftermath of fascism's vulgar appropriation of "populist themes" like family, folk culture, spirituality and ties to the land, have been hesitant about developing their full symbolic and communicative potentials, an American movement begins with strikingly different possibilities: we now have an enormous wealth of organizing experiences and social historical work, alike, that furnish solid foundations for developing a democratic and ecological populism, interweaving concepts of community and grassroots democracy with values of sustainability, feminism, love of the land and peace.

#### The new populism.

"Populism," of course, is a term with many and diverse meanings, especially in this most historically forgetful of societies. Many on the right have taken up the term—Richard Viguier's recent book *The Establishment vs. the People* calls for a "conservative populist party." And in the Democratic orbit, "populism" can mean simply a new rhetorical packaging for proposals like tax reform. Yet it also has deeper, more transformative resonances.

Understood not mainly as a particular rhetorical pose or specific "issue agenda,"

### Populism suggests an approach grounded in the living fabric of human relationships, says Boyte.

populism suggests an approach grounded in the living fabric of human relationships—the organic, continuous and historical identities of communities that move into action to control the forces that threaten to overwhelm them. Populism—while always raising issues, struggling about power, challenging existing structures—is thus, ultimately, about values and cultural meanings. It occupies a different sort of space than conventional politics in the modern world—including the politics of the left, which protests the demise of settled communities even while it assumes their progressive replacement with abstract forms of association. The difference in strategic orientations of populism and the left helps clarify the distinction: the conventional left looks mainly for its support to settings where people have sundered their "roots"—mass organizations, mass parties and the like. Populist politics, on the other hand, draws its power and vision from institutions embedded in the fabric of community life like churches, synagogues, neighborhood groups, PTAs and ethnic clubs.

The savage assault on all forms of historical identity and communal ties that characterizes contemporary American capitalism—with its mass culture, cycles of boom and bust, multinational flows of capital and

enormous bureaucratic state apparatus—is the force that generates the new populist impulse. In response, much of populist organizing has a defensive and embattled quality. But there is also a rich body of experience that reinforces historical lessons from civil rights, labor, women's and other democratic movements: a "value-based approach," combining substantive discussions of diverse cultural traditions and values with effective and skilled work on particular issues, furnishes a kind of "schooling in citizenship." Through such experiences ordinary people can gain new experiences of power, dignity and self-respect, skills of public life and democratic values.

The effort to combine "Green" or ecological perspectives with populist ones is challenging, but the early experience of the Committees of Correspondence suggests great possibilities. A planning meeting last August in St. Paul, Minn., partly inspired by the book *Green Politics*, brought together several environmental leaders, peace activists, feminists and futurists with community organizers, leaders in church networks, people from farming regions and the like. The flood of correspondence that has come into the national communications office in the Twin Cities has been diverse. And the areas where local chapters have already organized have made promising progress toward bridging conventional political labels. (P.O. Box 40040, St. Paul, MN 55104; \$15 enlists one as a "Founding Correspondent," entitled to regular mailings and discussion bulletins leading up to the founding meeting.)

Many issues are unresolved: though many of us also respect the idealism and pioneering energy of groups like the Citizens' Party, most do not feel a "third party" will be most promising for broad, majoritarian political organizing. But the precise relationship between electoral involvement, educational campaigns and other forms of grassroots organizing can only be resolved through much discussion. Similarly, the ways a new political movement organization can create a vital democratic structure, drawing its main energy from local and regional groups while it works effectively in national and even international arenas, is a subject that can only be addressed at the organizing meeting next fall. But these issues are also occasions for intellectual vitality and organizational creativity. We urge all who share such concerns to join. ■

Harry C. Boyte is a member of the Interregional Committee, Chair, Office Committee, Committees of Correspondence. His last book is *Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots*.

## Can this tone of debate help build a popular movement?

By Diana Johnstone

**C**HARLENE SPRETNAK'S overreaction to a review by someone basically friendly to the Green movement only confirms my worst suspicions about weaknesses in political culture. Instead of accepting the fact of honest differences of opinion she flies into a rage of indignation against all the Philistines (thrown into the same pot for the occasion) who are persecuting the heralds of the new truth.

Is this the tone of debate that can build a great popular movement? Or of "good process"?

Privately, some German Greens (and not the least "holistic") criticize the Spretnak book as "too ideological." But that tendency gets far more out of hand in Harry

Boyte's piece. Perhaps the lessons of Nazism's distortion of "values" should not be just a German lesson but has universal validity.

I did not "excoriate" anybody, and certainly not (as Boyte writes) "for imagining that one could draw into a new American political movement ordinary Democrats and Republicans." On the contrary, I expressed misgivings about the suggestion that Greens might operate in the Republican Party, which is something quite different. And my suggestion that an American equivalent of the Green Party would draw in existing groups, such as the Citizens Party, etc., seems to have been thoroughly misunderstood.

May I recall my main point: that "holistic" politics, to be meaningful, should be able to recognize the contributions of varied political traditions and draw them together in a non-sectarian way. ■

## SUBSCRIBE NOW!

# Peace & Democracy News

### THE BULLETIN OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY/EAST AND WEST

Featuring exclusive articles and documents from peace, human rights, and social justice movements in the East, West and Third World.

Articles by Daniel Singer, Adam Hochschild, Richard Falk, Wim Bartels, Frank Brodhead and others.

"Peace & Democracy News profoundly challenges the logic of the Cold War. Must reading."  
—E.P. Thompson

Subscriptions: Individuals \$5, Institutions \$10

Write to:  
CPD/EW, Box 1640, Cathedral Station,  
New York, NY 10025 (212) 724-1157.