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Environmental Sociology and Just Transitions: Evaluating European Climate Policy, Participatory Governance, and Ecological Citizenship

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Abstract:

This article provides a critical sociopolitical evaluation of ecological transitions across the European Union, with a focused examination of French environmental governance mechanisms. As climate change mitigation shifts from theoretical consensus to legislative implementation, tension emerges between top-down regulatory frameworks and bottom-up socio-economic equity. Grounded in environmental sociology and institutional theory, this study investigates how state-led sustainability mandates impact marginalized socio-economic groups. Utilizing the framework of reflexive modernization and ecological citizenship, the paper analyzes participatory mechanisms—specifically the French Citizens' Convention for Climate (*Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat*)—and assesses their efficacy in institutional decision-making. The findings demonstrate that while institutional innovations promote broader public consultation, systemic constraints and entrenched economic interests frequently dilute participatory outcomes. The paper argues for a paradigm shift toward "just transitions" that integrate distributive justice into statutory climate policy.

Keywords: Environmental Sociology, Ecological Citizenship, Climate Governance, French Public Policy, Sorbonne Academic Studies, European Green Deal, Participatory Democracy.

1. Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis represents an unprecedented challenge to state sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, and socio-economic organization. Over the past three decades, global environmental governance has evolved from fragmented international treaties toward systemic regulatory frameworks designed to decarbonize national economies. Within the European Union, the adoption of the European Green Deal and national net-zero targets reflects a profound commitment to ecological restructuring. However, the translation of high-level climate objectives into operational domestic policy has revealed deep structural fractures within contemporary democratic societies.

Environmental sociology posits that ecological degradation cannot be analyzed independently of social stratification, political power dynamics, and historical capital accumulation. The physical manifestations of climate change—rising global temperatures, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss—are intrinsically linked to industrial modes of production and consumption. Consequently, efforts to mitigate environmental harm inevitably redistribute social burdens and economic costs. In nations such as France, where state intervention has historically played a central role in socio-economic regulation, top-down climate mandates have frequently sparked intense public resistance. The tension between ecological necessity and social equity raises fundamental questions regarding the legitimacy of contemporary climate governance.

This study examines the sociopolitical dimensions of ecological transitions, focusing on the French regulatory ecosystem as a critical case study within the broader European context. It addresses a fundamental research question: How can democratic states construct legal and institutional frameworks that achieve aggressive decarbonization while upholding principles of social justice and public participation? By critically evaluating existing regulatory instruments, citizen assemblies, and rights-based environmental litigation, this paper seeks to articulate a comprehensive framework for just ecological transitions.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Environmental Sociology and Reflexive Modernization

To understand the friction between climate policy and social stability, one must examine the theoretical paradigms governing environmental sociology. Central to this inquiry is the concept of "reflexive modernization," formulated by Ulrich Beck and

Anthony Giddens. Beck's theory of the "risk society" contends that industrial modernization produces systematic, globalized hazards that transcend traditional class boundaries and national borders. Unlike early industrial risks, which were localized and insurable, contemporary ecological threats are catastrophic, irreversible, and inherently linked to technological and economic advance.

In the phase of reflexive modernization, society becomes preoccupied with managing the unintended consequences of its own success. Institutions designed to foster industrial progress—such as market capitalism, administrative bureaucracies, and scientific establishments—are forced to confront their role in generating ecological hazards. This institutional reflexivity requires a fundamental reassessment of state-society relations. State apparatuses can no longer function merely as facilitators of capital accumulation; they must act as stewards of ecological survival and guardians of socio-economic equity.

Parallel to the risk society framework is the concept of "ecological citizenship," advanced by political theorists such as Andrew Dobson. Ecological citizenship redefines civil rights and duties through a non-territorial, environmental lens. It asserts that individuals and corporate entities possess ecological footprints that generate obligations to others, particularly vulnerable populations and future generations. Under this paradigm, environmental protection is not merely a matter of administrative regulation or consumer choice, but a fundamental civic duty enforced through legal and constitutional mechanisms.

However, the application of ecological citizenship within neoliberal policy environments presents significant contradictions. When environmental policies rely primarily on regressive consumption taxes, carbon pricing, or individualized green consumerism, they shift the burden of ecological adjustment onto working-class demographics. This dynamic exemplifies what environmental sociologists term "ecological injustice"—a scenario in which those least responsible for historical emissions bear the highest relative cost of climate mitigation policies.

3. The Architecture of European and French Climate Governance

The legal and institutional infrastructure governing European climate action operates through a complex multi-level governance network. At the supranational level, the European Union has positioned itself as a global leader in environmental regulation. The European Climate Law (Regulation EU 2021/1119) legally binds member states to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with an intermediate target of reducing net emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. This statutory framework is reinforced by the "Fit for 55" legislative package, which reforms the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), establishes carbon border adjustment mechanisms, and mandates aggressive renewable energy quotas.

In France, European directives are integrated into a robust domestic legal architecture characterized by centralized administrative planning and constitutionalized environmental rights. A pivotal development occurred with the enactment of the *Charte de l'environnement* (Environmental Charter) of 2004, which was incorporated into the Preamble of the French Constitution of 1958. The Charter recognizes fundamental rights, including the right to live in a balanced environment respectful of health (Article 1), and establishes the principles of precaution, prevention, and polluter-pays (Articles 3, 4, and 5).

Key Legislative Developments in France

The legislative translation of these constitutional principles has proceeded through several landmark statutes:

- **The Energy Transition for Green Growth Act (2015):** Established national trajectory targets for reducing fossil fuel consumption, diversifying energy production, and implementing carbon pricing mechanisms.
- **The Climate and Resilience Law (2021):** Transposed selected recommendations from the Citizens' Convention for Climate into statutory law, introducing bans on short-haul domestic flights where train alternatives exist, regulations on energy-inefficient housing rentals, and the creation of an offense of "ecocide."

Despite this sophisticated legal framework, implementation has faced persistent structural challenges. The French administrative state relies heavily on technocratic expertise and centralized decree-making. This regulatory style often prioritizes aggregate national target compliance over local socio-economic impact assessments, creating friction between central ministries and peripheral communities.

4. Socio-Economic Distributive Dynamics and Public Resistance

The socio-economic implications of environmental policy are vividly illustrated by the distributive impacts of carbon pricing. Economic theory suggests that internalizing carbon externalities through taxation is the most efficient method to curb greenhouse gas emissions. However, sociological analysis reveals that carbon taxes without redistributive offsets are inherently regressive, impacting low- and middle-income households disproportionately.

In France, this socio-economic dynamic culminated in the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement in late 2018. The immediate catalyst was a proposed increase in the domestic consumption tax on energy products (*Taxe intérieure de consommation sur les produits énergétiques* - TICPE), aimed at reducing diesel fuel usage. While framed by the government as an essential ecological measure, the tax fell disproportionately on peri-urban and rural working-class populations who relied exclusively on private vehicles for daily transportation due to inadequate public transit infrastructure.

Sociological studies of the movement demonstrated that public opposition was not rooted in climate skepticism or anti-environmental sentiment. Rather, participants expressed profound resentment toward what they perceived as "punitive ecology"—a governance model that penalized structural dependencies without offering viable, affordable alternatives. The movement highlighted the operational divergence between "the end of the month" (*la fin du mois*) and "the end of the world" (*la fin du monde*), exposing the political instability generated when environmental policies ignore class realities.

The retreat of the French government on the carbon tax increase demonstrated the boundaries of technocratic climate policy. It proved that ecological policy instruments cannot succeed purely on environmental efficiency grounds; they must possess socio-economic legitimacy. When environmental legislation fails to incorporate compensatory mechanisms—such as targeted tax rebates, subsidized public transit, or housing retrofit grants—it risks alienating the broad public coalition required for sustained ecological transformation.

5. Participatory Innovations: The Case of the Citizens' Convention for Climate

In response to the democratic crisis highlighted by the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, the French state introduced an unprecedented experiment in deliberative democracy: the Citizens' Convention for Climate (*Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* - CCC). Launched in October 2019, the CCC convened 150 randomly selected citizens, representative of the demographic, geographic, and socio-economic diversity of France, to draft legislative proposals aimed at reducing national emissions by at least 40% by 2030 in a spirit of social justice.

From a sociological perspective, the CCC represented a departure from traditional representative and technocratic policymaking models. For nine months, participating citizens received extensive briefings from climate scientists, economists, legal scholars, and industry representatives. The process demonstrated that lay citizens, when provided with balanced information, rigorous deliberation structures, and adequate time, are capable of formulating sophisticated, ambitious policy frameworks that address complex systemic problems.

In June 2020, the CCC submitted 149 proposals to the executive branch, spanning transport, housing, food production, consumption, and industrial manufacturing. The proposals included structural measures such as legal accountability for environmental damage, mandatory energetic renovation of buildings, and restrictions on commercial advertising for carbon-intensive products.

Institutional Filtering and Executive Dilution

However, the translation of citizen proposals into binding legislation revealed severe institutional limitations. Despite initial executive assurances that proposals would be submitted to parliament or public referendum "without filter," the executive branch exerted substantial filtering authority. During the drafting of the 2021 Climate and Resilience Law, key recommendations were softened, deferred, or eliminated due to lobbying from industrial sectors and opposition from economic ministries concerned with short-term growth metrics.

The trajectory of the CCC highlights a fundamental tension in modern administrative governance: the conflict between participatory democratic inputs and entrenched executive power structures. While deliberative assemblies excel at generating high-legitimacy policy recommendations, they lack statutory enforcement authority. When representative institutions dilute citizen consensus, it risks compounding public cynicism regarding environmental governance and participatory democracy.

6. Legal Mobilization and Rights-Based Environmental Litigation

Faced with administrative inertia and political filtering, civil society organizations, local governments, and citizen collectives have increasingly turned to judicial avenues to enforce climate commitments. Legal mobilization has emerged as a primary mechanism for bridging the gap between statutory targets and operational compliance.

In France, this judicial turn is anchored by two landmark legal actions that transformed domestic climate jurisprudence:

6.1. The Grande-Synthe Litigation

The municipality of Grande-Synthe, a coastal town in northern France highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, filed a petition with the *Conseil d'État* (the highest administrative court) challenging the French government's refusal to take additional measures to achieve national emission reduction trajectories. In a historic ruling in November 2020 and subsequent enforcement orders in July 2021, the *Conseil d'État* recognized that national climate targets set by domestic law and EU regulations create binding legal obligations for the state.

The Court observed that France was exceeding its statutory carbon budgets and ordered the Prime Minister and relevant executive authorities to implement all necessary administrative measures by March 2022 to align emissions trajectories with the 40% target. This decision marked a profound shift: international and national carbon reduction goals were no longer treated as non-binding political promises, but as judicially enforceable statutory duties.

6.2. L'Affaire du Siècle (The Case of the Century)

Concurrently, four non-governmental organizations (Oxfam France, Greenpeace France, Notre Affaire à Tous, and the Fondation pour la Nature et l'Homme) initiated legal proceedings against the French State before the Administrative Court of Paris. Supported by a public petition signed by over 2.3 million citizens, the plaintiffs argued that state inaction on climate change constituted an administrative fault (*faute administrative*) causing environmental damage (*préjudice écologique*).

In February 2021, the Paris Administrative Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, formally recognizing the existence of environmental damage linked to climate change and holding the French State legally liable for failing to meet its first carbon budget targets (2015–2018). In October 2021, the court issued an injunction ordering the state to repair the ecological harm by compensating for excess greenhouse gas emissions by December 2022.

Sociological and Legal Implications

These legal victories illustrate the growing role of the judiciary as an arena for environmental accountability. Rights-based climate litigation reconfigures the power dynamic between citizens and the administrative state. By transforming vague environmental aspirations into concrete legal liabilities, judicial decisions compel executive bureaucracies to institutionalize climate science within everyday administrative decision-making.

7. Toward a Model of "Just Transitions"

The empirical evidence from French and European climate policy demonstrates that technical efficiency and legal mandates are insufficient to guarantee successful decarbonization. To ensure long-term stability and democratic support, climate governance must adopt a comprehensive "Just Transition" framework grounded in three dimensions of environmental justice:

7.1. Distributive Justice

Distributive justice requires that the financial and social costs of ecological transitions are allocated fairly according to capacity and historical responsibility. Policy instruments must be designed to insulate vulnerable households from regressive economic impacts. This includes:

- Direct revenue recycling from carbon pricing into universal social dividends or targeted green subsidies.
- Progressive taxation structures that tax luxury carbon consumption while subsidizing essential energy usage.
- Massive public investments in low-carbon infrastructure in historically neglected rural and peripheral urban areas.

7.2. Procedural Justice

Procedural justice mandates democratic participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of climate policies. Rather than treating public consultation as a reactive, post-hoc exercise, institutions must embed deliberative mechanisms into the legislative process. This requires:

- Institutionalizing citizen assemblies with formal statutory standing and parliamentary reporting mechanisms.
- Enhancing access to environmental information and administrative justice in alignment with the Aarhus Convention.
- Empowering regional and municipal governments to co-design decarbonization plans tailored to local socio-economic contexts.

7.3. Recognition Justice

Recognition justice demands the formal acknowledgment of the diverse socio-cultural identities, livelihoods, and spatial realities of affected communities. Ecological transition strategies must avoid imposing urban-centric lifestyles onto rural populations or dismissing worker anxieties in traditional industrial sectors. A just transition framework must fund proactive workforce retraining, economic diversification programs, and social safety nets for communities impacted by the phase-out of carbon-intensive industries.

8. Conclusion

The transition toward a low-carbon society represents the central political and sociological project of the twenty-first century. As demonstrated by the French experience, navigating this transformation requires far more than technological innovation and administrative targets. It demands a fundamental reconciliation between environmental imperatives and democratic legitimacy. Top-down, technocratic climate policy risk triggering profound social backlash when they exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities. The failure of unmitigated carbon pricing schemes highlights the political limits of "punitive ecology." Conversely, innovations such as the Citizens' Convention for Climate and rights-based judicial litigation illustrate the immense potential of democratic engagement and legal accountability in accelerating ecological reform.

For France, the European Union, and democratic states worldwide, the path forward requires institutionalizing the principles of just transitions. By embedding distributive, procedural, and recognition justice into the statutory framework of environmental law, state apparatuses can build the broad democratic coalitions necessary to achieve ecological sustainability. Only through an integrated approach that treats social equity and environmental protection as inseparable goals can modern societies successfully navigate the complex realities of the risk society.

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