

Matti Vesa Volanen

Ecological Civilization - Our Only Chance



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*Towards Ecological Realism, Communal Reproduction and
Democratic Transition*

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Introduction

Ecological Civilization as a Historical Necessity

We live in a time in which the inherited categories of political and social thought are losing their grip on reality. “Growth,” “development,” “security,” “prosperity,” “efficiency,” “progress,” and even “democracy” still organize public discourse, institutional design, and political aspiration. Yet the more insistently they are invoked, the less adequate they appear to the world they are supposed to describe. Climate systems are destabilizing. Biodiversity is collapsing. Material throughput continues to exceed regenerative thresholds. Infrastructures are becoming brittle. Labour is increasingly exhausted by acceleration, abstraction, and insecurity. Care systems are stretched past durability. Public life is fragmented between managerial administration and affective polarization. Debt and capitalization transform ever larger portions of the future into present claims. Geopolitical order grows harsher even as ecological interdependence grows more visible. The result is not a sequence of separate crises. It is a crisis of orientation.

This book begins from the proposition that the ecological crisis cannot be understood adequately as an environmental crisis narrowly conceived. It is not simply a matter of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, pollution, or resource depletion considered one by one. Nor is it merely a failure of regulation, price formation, governance capacity, or individual restraint. Such approaches may capture important dimensions of the problem, but they leave its deeper structure intact. The claim of this book is that the ecological crisis is a **civilizational crisis**. What is in crisis is not only nature, nor only policy, but the historically dominant way of organizing the relation between nature, labour, value, time, ownership, knowledge, and power.

To say that the crisis is civilizational is to say several things at once. It means, first, that the ecological question cannot be relegated to one sector among others, as if “the environment” were simply one policy field to be balanced against economics, security, welfare, or technological competitiveness. The ecological crisis concerns the conditions under which all those fields remain possible at all. Second, it means that the present disorder is not accidental. It is not merely the byproduct of otherwise successful institutions that can be corrected at the margins. Rather, it emerges from the very logic of a social order that has historically expanded by treating the future as available for present appropriation, nature as background condition, labour as abstract input, and social reproduction as invisible substrate. Third, it means that an adequate response cannot consist in environmental safeguards added to an otherwise unchanged social model. What is required is a transformation of the social model itself.

That transformation is named in this book as **ecological civilization**.

The phrase may sound broad, even overreaching. It can easily be mistaken either for a moral slogan or for a totalizing blueprint. I mean neither. “Ecological civilization” does not designate a final model of social perfection. It does not imply that one political tradition, one state, one region, or one civilizational bloc already embodies the answer. Nor does it suggest a smooth transition conducted by enlightened elites through technocratic planning. Rather, it names a historical direction. It names the direction in which society begins to reorganize itself in accordance with the conditions of life. If that reorganization does not occur, the alternatives are not equally viable paths within an open field of choices. They are variations on intensifying breakdown. In that precise sense, ecological civilization is not one option among many. It is our only chance.

This argument requires a different kind of realism from the one usually mobilized in contemporary politics. “Realism” today often means

accommodation to existing power relations, geopolitical hardening, budgetary restraint, strategic competition, or institutional inertia. In this book, however, realism means something more fundamental: the capacity to think and act in relation to the actual conditions upon which life depends. I call this **ecological realism**. Ecological realism begins from the proposition that societies do not stand outside the world they organize. Human beings, economies, states, and infrastructures remain embedded in and dependent upon material, energetic, ecological, embodied, and reproductive conditions that they did not create and do not fully control. These conditions are not optional. They are not social constructions in the weak sense that they can be redefined at will. Nor are they merely external constraints imposed upon an otherwise autonomous social realm. They are constitutive conditions of social life itself.

Ecological realism therefore differs from two opposite errors. On the one hand, it rejects the modern fantasy of external mastery: the idea that society can, in principle, treat the world as an object of calculation, extraction, and management without being transformed by the consequences. On the other hand, it rejects any quietist naturalism that would dissolve politics into necessity. The point is not to replace social thought with environmental determinism. The point is to reconstruct social and political thought so that freedom, normativity, and collective action are re-situated within the conditions of life rather than imagined beyond them.

This reconstruction requires a new conceptual architecture. The first building block of that architecture is the idea of the **texture of life**. Life is not adequately described as a set of isolated entities or as a purely undifferentiated flow. It is better understood as a woven texture: a historically layered order of energy, matter, form, temporality, relation, and meaning. Within that texture, relatively stable forms emerge, persist, transform, and decay. What matters are not only things, but the relations, boundaries, rhythms, and feedbacks that

sustain them. This image is ontological before it is political, yet its political consequences are immediate. A society that sees only extractable objects and exchangeable units cannot perceive the textures upon which its own continuity depends.

The second building block is the **endo/exo dialectic**. Every living or social form maintains itself through a relation between internal organization and external conditions. “Endo” names the internal ordering by which a form holds together as itself; “exo” names the external flows, pressures, affordances, and limits upon which that internal order depends. Neither exists meaningfully without the other. There is no inner coherence that is not sustained through relation to external conditions, and no external condition that appears except in relation to some organized interior. This dialectic provides a relational grammar for thinking inner and outer nature, embodiment and environment, labour and ecology, institution and world.

A third building block is **semiotic ecology**. Life is not only a material process but also a layered field of meaningful differences. Physical gradients become biologically relevant differences; biological responsiveness develops into perceptual and affective worlds; human communities construct symbolic, technical, and institutional orders through which they read and reorganize the world. The ecological crisis is therefore not only a disturbance of material balances; it is also a crisis of interpretation. It concerns what societies register as significant, how they classify and value the world, and what they render invisible. An ecologically destructive order is also a semiotically distorted order.

These ontological and anthropological considerations lead to a reinterpretation of the human being. The human is not an external observer surveying a neutral world. Human beings are embodied, historical, technical, affective, and participating creatures. They inhabit worlds through practice, language, imitation, tool-use,

memory, mood, institution, and care. They do not merely represent the world; they dwell within it and transform it while being transformed by it. This participatory anthropology matters politically because the modern crisis rests in part on the fantasy of detachment. A civilization organized around external observation, abstraction, and control gradually loses the capacity to recognize its own dependence on the very conditions it instrumentalizes.

From there the book turns to **second nature**: the historically constituted order through which human societies organize their lives. I reconstruct second nature through four interdependent fields—language, community, work, and exchange—corresponding analytically to *schole*, *polis*, *oikos*, and *agora*. These fields are not arbitrary. Language gives society conceptual and symbolic articulation; community gives it collective self-organization and political form; work mediates material life; exchange coordinates differentiation through comparison and circulation. Modernity did not simply develop these fields. It differentiated and disembedded them. Knowledge separated from life, politics from material reproduction, work from meaning, and exchange from social and ecological substance. Ecological civilization requires not their collapse into undifferentiated unity, but their reintegration under changed conditions.

The normative language of the book emerges here as well. A viable social order must hold together questions of **truth, the good, the beautiful, and the just**. These are not ornamental ideals added after the fact. They are orientations internal to social life. Truth concerns the adequacy of our understanding of real dependencies and limits. The good concerns forms of collective life worth sustaining. The beautiful concerns well-made form, fittingness, and care in the shaping of the world. The just concerns the allocation of benefits, burdens, responsibilities, and power. Modern civilization did not abolish these orientations, but it increasingly split them apart: truth into technical expertise, the good into moral rhetoric or state

legitimation, the beautiful into consumption and design, the just into residual questions of distribution after the basic structures had already been decided. Ecological civilization requires them to be brought back into relation.

The practical intelligence adequate to this task is what the book calls **metis**. Metis is situated, adaptive, craft-based, rhythm-sensitive intelligence. It is neither anti-theoretical nor anti-political; it is the form of judgment needed when abstract rules and centralized plans confront complex, living, layered realities. Metis recognizes material resistance, time-lags, local knowledge, repair, maintenance, and the irreducibility of lived situations. It stands against the fantasy that social and ecological systems can be governed by abstraction alone.

These conceptual developments culminate institutionally in the distinction between **dominium** and **custodium**. Modern ownership has largely been shaped by dominium: expansive powers of use, benefit, and disposal. Ecological civilization requires a shift toward custodium: stewardship bounded by the conditions of life. The question is not whether things may be used, but under what terms they may be used, by whom, for what, and with what obligations toward regeneration, repair, and continuity. Ownership, on this view, becomes a derivative and limited form of power rather than a foundational right of unrestricted control.

The book then turns from foundations to political economy. Here its central proposal is that **production** must cease to function as the master category. Production remains indispensable in a narrow sense—societies must indeed make and do things—but it is no longer sufficient as the organizing concept of social thought. The more fundamental category is **communal reproduction**: the collective renewal of the embodied, social, material, ecological, and institutional conditions of life. Reproduction here is not simply household maintenance or biological continuity, though both are included. It

names the broader process by which inner and outer nature are maintained, repaired, and regenerated across time. Once this shift is made, the centrality of care, maintenance, restoration, public infrastructure, education, housing, ecological repair, and democratic coordination becomes unmistakable.

This shift also transforms the meaning of work. The problem is not only that labour is exploited; it is that labour is subordinated to a social logic that values output, profitability, and abstract growth over the reproduction of life. The question is not only how to free people from work, but how to **liberate work** itself—how to transform work from a function of valorization into a meaningful participation in communal reproduction. Similar rethinking is required with respect to money and debt. Money appears as a medium of exchange, but in reality it is also a claim on the future. Debt structures present action through anticipated future returns. Under ecological conditions, such promissory structures become unstable and morally suspect when they rely on claims against futures that cannot be ecologically and socially sustained. Hence the book's interest in **triple ledger accounting**, ecological constraints, and the subordination of financial logic to the actual conditions of renewal.

Politically, this leads to **ecological democracy**. Democracy, under ecological conditions, cannot mean preference aggregation alone, nor merely procedural legitimacy detached from material realities. It must become collective governance of the conditions of life. This requires not only stronger environmental policy but a deeper transformation in democratic scope, institutional design, and state form. The state must be rethought as moving from security state to welfare state, from welfare state to ecological state, and from ecological state toward the **communal state**: a form of public power whose task is not merely to govern subjects or redistribute outputs, but to enable the communal reproduction of life under shared conditions.

At that point the argument becomes explicitly programmatic. Yet the book resists the fantasy of a total plan. Ecological transition is not a blueprint to be applied to passive reality. It is a historical process requiring legitimacy, infrastructures of life, reorganization of work and care, redirection of finance and ownership, democratic deepening, and geopolitical reorientation. It is also a temporal problem. Modern society is dominated by accelerated presentism, whereas life unfolds across multiple temporal layers. The book therefore develops the image of the **world clock**, distinguishing the rhythms of pulse, credit, capacity, flow, and inheritance. Transition requires the governance not of one homogeneous time but of multiple interacting temporalities.

Finally, the book situates ecological civilization geopolitically and world-historically. Europe, it argues, must be rethought not as a detached normative island but as part of Eurasia, materially and strategically embedded in wider continental and planetary realities. More broadly, ecological civilization must be understood not as a new hegemonic bloc but as a possible **civilization of civilizations**: a common horizon within which different civilizational traditions are compelled into self-revision under shared planetary conditions.

This, then, is the argument of the book in outline. It proceeds from diagnosis to ontology, from ontology to political economy, from political economy to democracy and state form, from there to program, temporality, geopolitics, and conclusion. The wager throughout is that the present crisis can neither be grasped nor addressed within inherited categories alone. It demands a deeper conceptual and civilizational shift.

If the title of this book is strong, it is because the historical situation is strong. “Ecological civilization” is not offered as a rhetorical flourish or a consoling vision. It is offered as the name of the only direction

Part I. Diagnosis

The current ecological crisis is not a single environmental disturbance, but a crisis of the modern civilization of promise, growth, and control. This crisis cannot be solved by mere technical fixes, but requires a new understanding of reality, a new basic economic category, and a new democratic idea of society.

The book's answer to this is ecological realism, commoning reproduction, and a democratic transition toward ecological civilization.

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