

Opinion: A green transition will not be good for everyone

June 27 2023



"A green transition will not be good for everyone. If we pretend it's not true, we are only creating an opportunity for populist politicians to say Oh look, they don't want you to hear about that," says Alexander Ruser. Credit: Maria van Schoor

If you have been following the climate debate at all, you are bound to have heard the following arguments: "Everyone agrees that climate change is an urgent problem. We need to act now, or it will be too late. There really is no time for debate—the world is burning."

Is this kind of thinking only compounding our problems?

In a new article published in the journal *Politiche Sociali*, Professor Alexander Ruser at the University of Agder argues the connection between the green shift in the welfare state and risk of increased polarization.

Green inequality

"Historically, the welfare state could expand because the capitalist economies expanded. If capitalist expansion is becoming a problem, the welfare state has a problem. And that problem is becoming urgent," says Ruser.

He sees a tension between functional arguments and normative arguments. The first kind are telling us that we must act now and reform the welfare state. The second kind are telling us that those that don't agree are [climate change](#) deniers, lunatics or worse.

"Environmental reforms don't impact everyone equally. Poverty complicates matters like investing in home insulation, shifting to a

renewable energy provider, or buying an electric car," he says.

We need to talk more openly about how transitioning to a green welfare state can increase inequality, argues Ruser.

"A green transition will not be good for everyone. If we pretend it's not true, we are only creating an opportunity for populist politicians to say Oh look, they don't want you to hear about that," says Ruser.

No alternative

The professor sees a template for understanding the current moment in the third way politics of the late 90s and early 2000s. Often associated with [political leaders](#) such as U.S. President Bill Clinton and U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, the approach sought to combine [free market economic policies](#) with progressive social policies.

"Margaret Thatcher famously introduced the acronym TINA—There Is No Alternative. That was how third way politics were introduced, and that form of thinking is coming back in the debates about the green welfare state," says Ruser.

While [climate scientists](#) may dictate what needs to be done, implementing the changes will affect people's lives, and that is where the welfare state comes in.

"We need to remember that we're not just dealing with abstract policies, but with the lives and livelihoods of real people," says Ruser.

Pressure cooker

Conflicts over the welfare state is hardly a new phenomenon. Ruser

points to how the same debates have surfaced in the 1990s, with the oil price shocks in the 1970s, and in the years after World War II.

This time is different, however, because we are running out of time to resolve them.

"We're experiencing these debates in a pressure cooker situation. Unlike before, when we could take our time to come up with the best solutions, we don't have that luxury when it comes to sustainable transformation. We can't sit back and think about the solution for 25 years," says Ruser.

A collective problem

Today's situation also differs in one other crucial way. The [welfare](#) state was traditionally built around collective identities, such as classes or professions. This focus has increasingly shifted to individuals and individual choices.

"On the one hand, this is good because we live in societies that emphasize individual decisions and opportunities. On the other hand, it also risks overlooking structural inequalities. By focusing on individuals, we often fail to recognize collective actors and the issues they face," says Ruser.

Take for instance people protesting road tolls, and how they are portrayed in the media. Often, they are seen as weird outliers. Only rarely are they portrayed as working-class people experiencing a working-class problem.

"We have to fundamentally rethink the [welfare state](#) in times when the original, collective logic is weakened. But there is a contradiction, because with climate change, we all really are in the same boat. Politicians should engage more in these debates," says Ruser.

More information: Alexander Ruser, Undeserving and Dangerous: The Construction of Outsiders and the Return of the Third Way in Green Welfare State Debates, *Politiche Sociali, Social Policies* (2023). DOI: [10.7389/107139](https://doi.org/10.7389/107139). www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.7389/107139

Provided by University of Agder

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