

The protestant legacy in man's relationship with nature: from romantism to ecologism

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'Draft, not for quotation'

Paper submitted for the 9th European Sociological Association Conference “ESA 2009 – European Society or European Societies?”, Research Network “Environmental attitudes and values ”, 02-05 September 2009 in Lisbon, Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

When we think about the protection of the environment, North Europe or even North America come instantly to mind : the US for the invention of the first national natural park in 1872 ; Germany, for the strength of its ecological movement ; England for the precocity and the importance of its associations for the protection of nature and animals ; but also the Scandinavian countries for their environmental politics, their ecological lifestyle and their proximity to nature.

The fact that ecologism appears earlier and has always been more successful in Northern European countries deserves a further reflexion on the relationship between Protestantism and the protection of the environment and hence on the protestant “feeling” towards nature. All the more so since the voices that celebrated the beauty and virtues of nature and wilderness from Rousseau to the romantics bears the mark of the protestant culture. Although it might be absurd to attribute everything to the influence of religious development, the fact remains that new relationships with nature – philosophical, ethical or practical relationships, esthetical schemes or legislative rules – mainly originated from protestant areas.

The idea that the European nations differ in their attitudes towards the environment looks like a sociological truism. However little – if nothing – has been said on the possible influence of religion in man’s relationship with nature.

This paper proposes to highlight the protestant legacy in environmental attitudes through the confrontation of historical argumentative considerations and contemporary empirical data mainly based on Eurobarometers surveys. Although these European surveys are not always the most relevant ones, they have the advantage of furnishing longitudinal data and thus of reducing the margin of error inherent to public polls and also of attenuating the fluctuant nature of public opinion.

1. Environmentalism and Protestantism: some historical and empirical evidence

- the birthplace of ecological ideas

From an ideological point of view, one can locate the emergence of ecological ideas in the nineteenth century romantic movement with reference to its organic view of nature and its critical analysis of modernity. The German romantic view of nature – seeing nature as an organism, a unified whole, humanity included – was an important source of inspiration for the emergence of this new discipline, ecology, but also for alternative conceptions and practices in medicine and agriculture (homeopathy, biodynamic agriculture) that originated from Germanic-speaking cultures. As we know, the romantic movement began first in England and has been particularly influential in Germany. It also finds an important development in the US through its transcendentalist counterparts of the end of the nineteenth century from Emerson, Thoreau to Muir, pioneer figures of the American environmentalist movement.

In the wake of the romantic movement, one can locate the first peak of environmental mobilization at the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the first main historical associations and the apparition of the first political initiatives and actions. England, Germany and the US appear at the forefront of this movement.

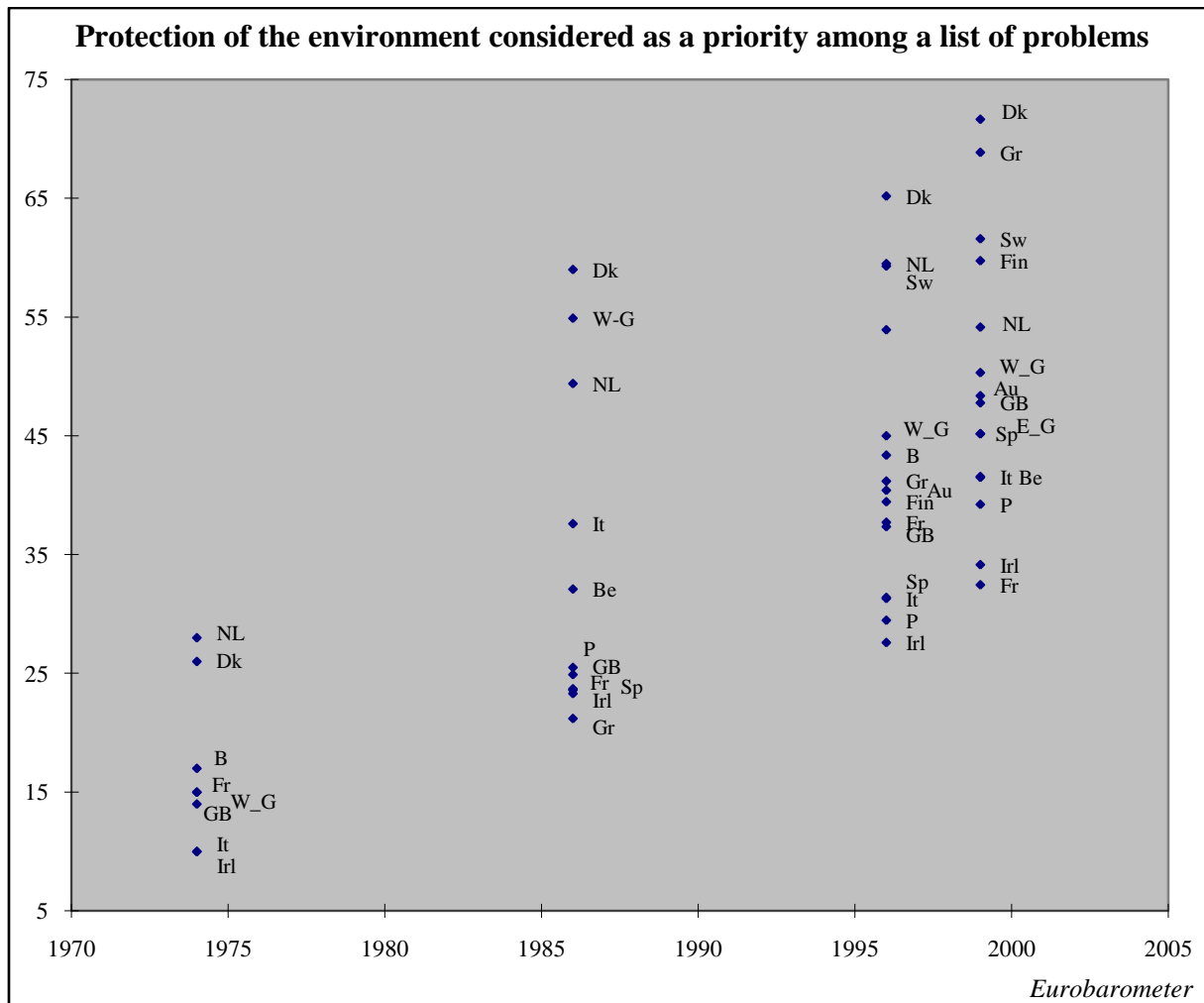
In France the romantic movement didn't give birth to such a philosophy of nature as the German Naturphilosophy or American transcendentalism. And if Rousseau comes instantly to mind, we have to remember Rousseau's links to Switzerland and his attachment to its mountains and also that Rousseau was brought up by his pietistic aunt in Switzerland. Compared to the spring up of environmental mobilization that characterises the three previous countries, the first environmental initiatives remain rare in France at this time and mostly confined to scientific and artist circles.

- **The contemporary realization of the environmental problems**

If we look at the more recent wave of environmental mobilization, it's at the heart of the advanced industrial society – the US of the sixties – that the debate related to pollution and the environment bursts into. Prominent naturalists such as R. Carson, B. Commoner, P. Ehrlich, F. Osborn, R. Dubos alert the Americans and more broadly the international community to a set of environmental dangers of a new kind (chemical products, radioactivity, demographic bomb, resources limits and so on). A few years later the first leading environmental demonstration took place : Earth Day in year 1970.

When the environmental debate crosses the Atlantic, Northern Europe is first concerned, opening up the debate on demographic explosion and limits to growth essentially through associations and scientific groups.

The Eurobarometer surveys confirm this earlier concern that characterizes northern European populations, such as the Danish and the Dutch, quickly followed by the Germans. From 1974 to 1999, Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, Germany during the eighties seem to furnish the strongest supporters for an environmental politics while Portugal, France, Italy and Ireland remain generally less preoccupied by environmental problems.



This doesn't mean that the environmental problems struck no chord within Southern European countries. A collection of data testifies strong environmental concerns and anxiety among the rest of Europe. But between declaring anxiety about the different environmental problems and placing environmental protection at the fore of national political priorities, there is a gap that evidences the deepest environmental awareness of the northern European public.

2. How to understand the connection between environmentalism and Protestantism?

- **Environmentalism as a reaction to or a manifestation of the more advanced industrialism of the northern countries**

In the line of Weber thesis, one has to consider the more precocious and advanced industrialization of the protestant countries.

If, historically, the first wave of environmental mobilization grows mostly in England, Germany and in the US, it's also because these three countries are at this time the most industrialized countries in the world facing thus at first environmental problems such as

deforestation or urban pollutions caused by the heavy industrialization of the nineteenth century. The same can be said for the second wave of environmental mobilization of the sixties-seventies that as we said before emerged first at the “heart” of and against the advanced industrialized societies. Environmentalism as well as the romantic protest of the nineteenth century can be then analysed as a reaction to the industrialization of the world.

An alternative non-materialistic source of explanation is offered by the Inglehart theory that explains the strongest environmental concern and mobilization of the Northern western countries by the higher level of welfare experienced by these countries. These populations and more specifically the baby-boom generation that have grown up in a context of physical and material safety have been able to develop non material aspirations and concerns such as world equity, social justice, personal fulfilment, quality of life, environmental concerns... Their basic needs having been fulfilled, they can thus have more post-material aspirations.

The problem of this theory is that it tends to disconnect environmental concerns from the environmental problems and context itself and we can question today the relevance of considering environmental problems as a post-material concern as they present themselves not only in terms of quality of life but more and more in terms of sustainability.

If the social and economic context have to be considered in the explanation of environmental attitudes, it doesn't seem sufficient to understand the differences we observed in Europe. For example the level of economic welfare or the level of education doesn't allow to explain the differences in green sensitivity we observed between France and Belgium on the one hand, and the northern European protestant countries on the other hand, countries for which the levels of education and economic welfare are relative similar. Furthermore, a regression analysis shows that strong environmental values (such as ranking environmental problems at the top of national political priorities) find their first source of explanation in the national criteria before being explained by the level of education (the income having here no effect).

These results invite us to consider other sources of explanation for the European differences in green values. All the more since it's not only in the degree of concerns but also in the way to face or understand the environmental crisis that important differences emerge, showing the role of the individual within the society and the relationship to state which has to be considered along the line of the religious legacy.

- **The concept of “elective affinity”: the contributions of the Reform**

Another way to analyse the link between Environmentalism and Protestantism is to consider the possible consequences of the Reform in man's relationship with nature. The destruction of the traditional catholic hierarchy and the promotion of a direct connection between man and God are in this respect the most important changes brought by the Reformist religion.

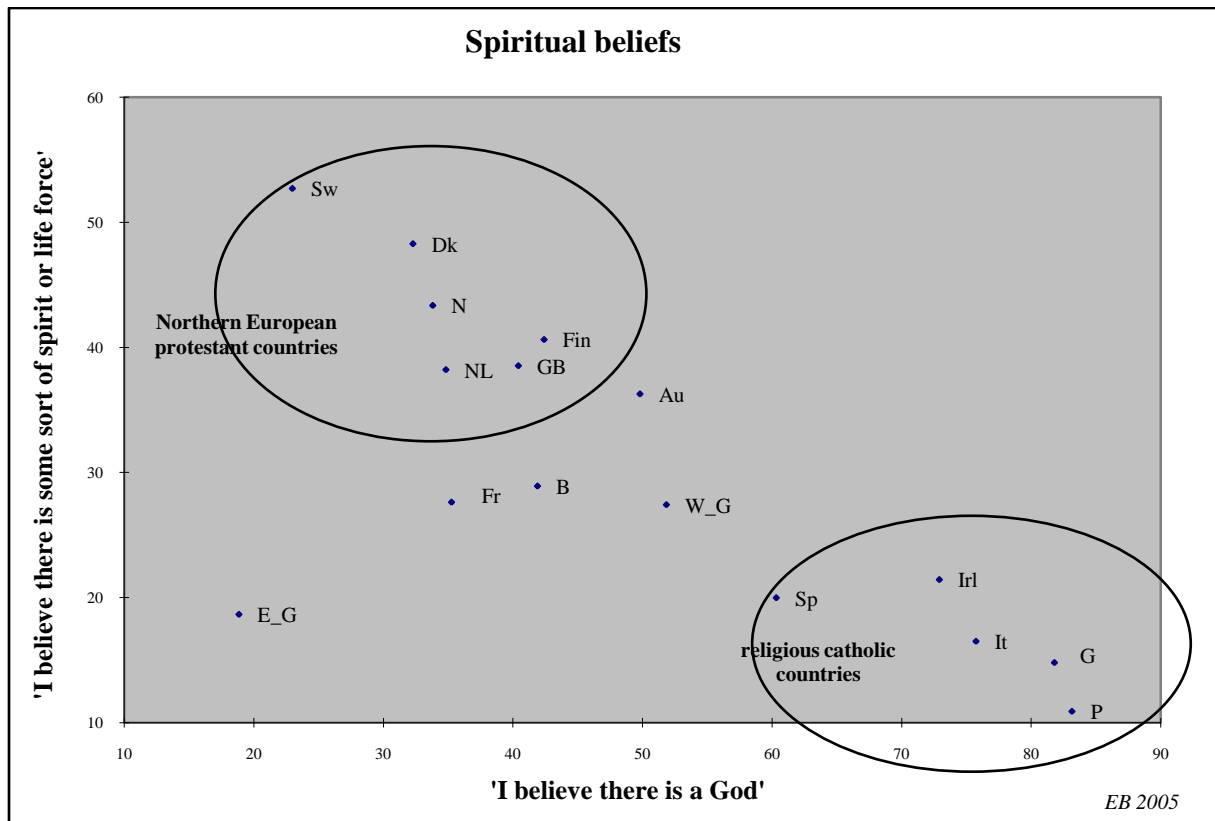
- *Nature as the chosen mediator in a world free of religious iconography*

By abolishing the worship of the saints and of the Virgin Mary and by reducing considerably the influence of the church, the Reform leaves the Christian in a redoubtable face-to-face with God. By doing this it also promotes a direct link between man and God : a God shapeless and faceless, both hidden and present everywhere, “inside of us” (Luther) and outside of us, by making himself known “indirectly by the work of nature” (Calvin).

In this context, nature (and no more the church) will become more and more the favorite go-between man and God and the way to express religious feeling, especially in the field of painting where all Christian iconography dedicated to saints disappears.

This deification of nature would explain the evolution of the landscapes painting that can be observed in the protestant countries and more notably in the German romantic art that becomes very distant from the French classicism that proposes a realistic, materialistic or sensitive representation of nature. In contrast, the symbolic landscapes of the German romantics such as Friedrich and Carus take particular care to reveal the divine presence that secretly inhabits nature. Their mysterious analogies between the human soul and nature, spirit and landscape exemplify the intimate connecting link between nature and the inner conscience and hence the inwardness relationship between man and nature that seems to characterize the northern European countries.

Through this deification of nature, the reformed religion takes in a way some aspects of the old pantheism. And the contemporary representations of God captured by the 2005 Eurobarometer survey evidences the paganism of the northern protestant countries as opposed to the traditional orthodox beliefs of the catholic countries especially the most religious one.



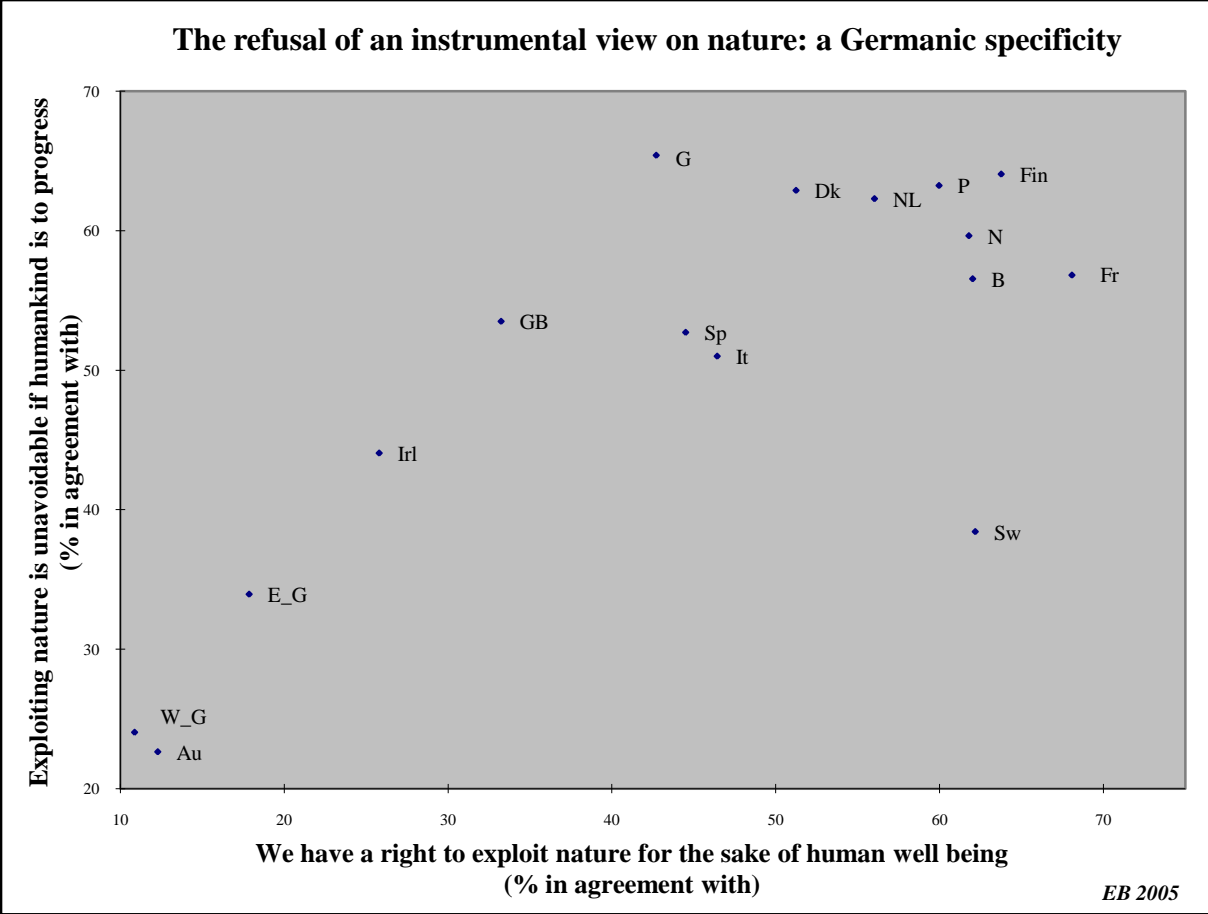
In this naturalistic inclination of the protestant beliefs and in this common image seeing northern Europeans as living closer to nature, one can also question – before the influence of the reformed religion – the role played by the geographical and climate conditions on the northern inhabitants whose lives have been probably more affected by Nature and the natural forces than in the dry Mediterranean countries. Indirectly the debate nature versus nurture gives some indications about the representations of man’s proximity to nature (through this historical conception of human exceptionalism as opposed to the biological determinism of the animal kingdom) and reveals in this respect a clear-cut north/south cleavage : through a strong tendency of the Northern Europeans to see human characteristics (especially those related to aptitudes such as intelligence, musical or athletic abilities, predisposition to mental illness) as innate while Southern Europeans are greater in number to see them as nurtured (EB1996). In this context it’s maybe not a coincidence for certain authors if the Protestantism took place in Northern countries.

If Protestantism could have been a particular fertile context for the birth and the development of the romantic movement, we have however to remember the specificity of the German and American cases. Both countries give birth to a romantic idealistic view on nature carrying with it a radical dissenting potential that probably lacks in the rest of the protestant countries. In Germany, in particular, the conservation movement had historically a “zivilisationskritischen Antimodernismus charakteristisch” that has to be considered as a particular feature of the German culture (from the first romantics to the Zivilisationskritik atmosphere of the end of the nineteenth century, from the “cultural pessimism” of Spengler

and Heidegger to the Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse). German critical philosophy of technology inspired from the ideal of a pacified relationship with nature graves the conservation movement in a very early ideology.

Contemporary data drawn from ISSP 2000 and Eurobarometers surveys show in this respect something specific to the Germanic representations of nature (Austria included as sharing the same linguistic community) characterized by a naturalistic or even Arcadian inclination, with regards to the preference German and Austrian populations show for natural or organic products, the fear they express towards chemical products or pesticides, but also their refusal to see nature as a resource designed to be exploited by humans as illustrated in the graphic below.

We have here to consider a “Germanic” specificity in the way to see nature that goes beyond the protestant criteria to include a linguistic community.



• *The ethics of responsibility*

The main innovation brought on by the reform is the idea of a personal and absolute relationship with God. Each believer becomes a sort of priest, in a direct link with God.

Along the line of Weber demonstration, the reformist religion pulls the notion of salvation out from the “cloister” and by doing this it invites the Christian to live his Christianity in

everyday society life as opposed to the Catholics' monastic asceticism. It's only through his entire life's conduct that the Protestant can get a sign of his state of grace. In the reformist religion, man can never be sure to please God, that's the reason he has constantly to act in order to eventually please God.

The individual responsibility but also the destruction of the catholic traditional hierarchy are two innovations that confront man with his fate. This new relationship to God modifies deep down the dynamic of individual identity, the social relationships and the relation to state. Man becomes directly responsible for himself but also for his commitment in this world.

- *The modernization of protestant countries*

The abolition of the domination of the Church also contributes to the modernization of the protestant countries by promoting the development of the public administration, national government and civil society. By encouraging the reading of the Old Testament that Luther first and for the first time translated in common language, the Reform also contributes to the alphabetisation of protestant populations.

3. The protestant ethic applied to the environmental problems

This new position of man in relation to the world encouraged by the reform – an individual responsible and committed in earth life – would thus explain the greatest patrimonial concern that is observed in protestant countries. It would also explain the important cleavage in between catholic and protestant countries in the way they understand and face the contemporary environmental crisis, an opposition I summarized through the concept of ethics versus politics.

- Ethics versus Politics

- *In the environmental discourse*

The contemporary environmental crisis stakes hazards of a new kind, characterized by the concepts of global nature, irreversibility and uncertainty. It begs the question of human responsibility in the destruction of nature that fuelled a whole philosophical and ethical debate to redefine the relationship between man and nature and for which the German and Anglo-Saxon intellectual communities have been particularly fertile.

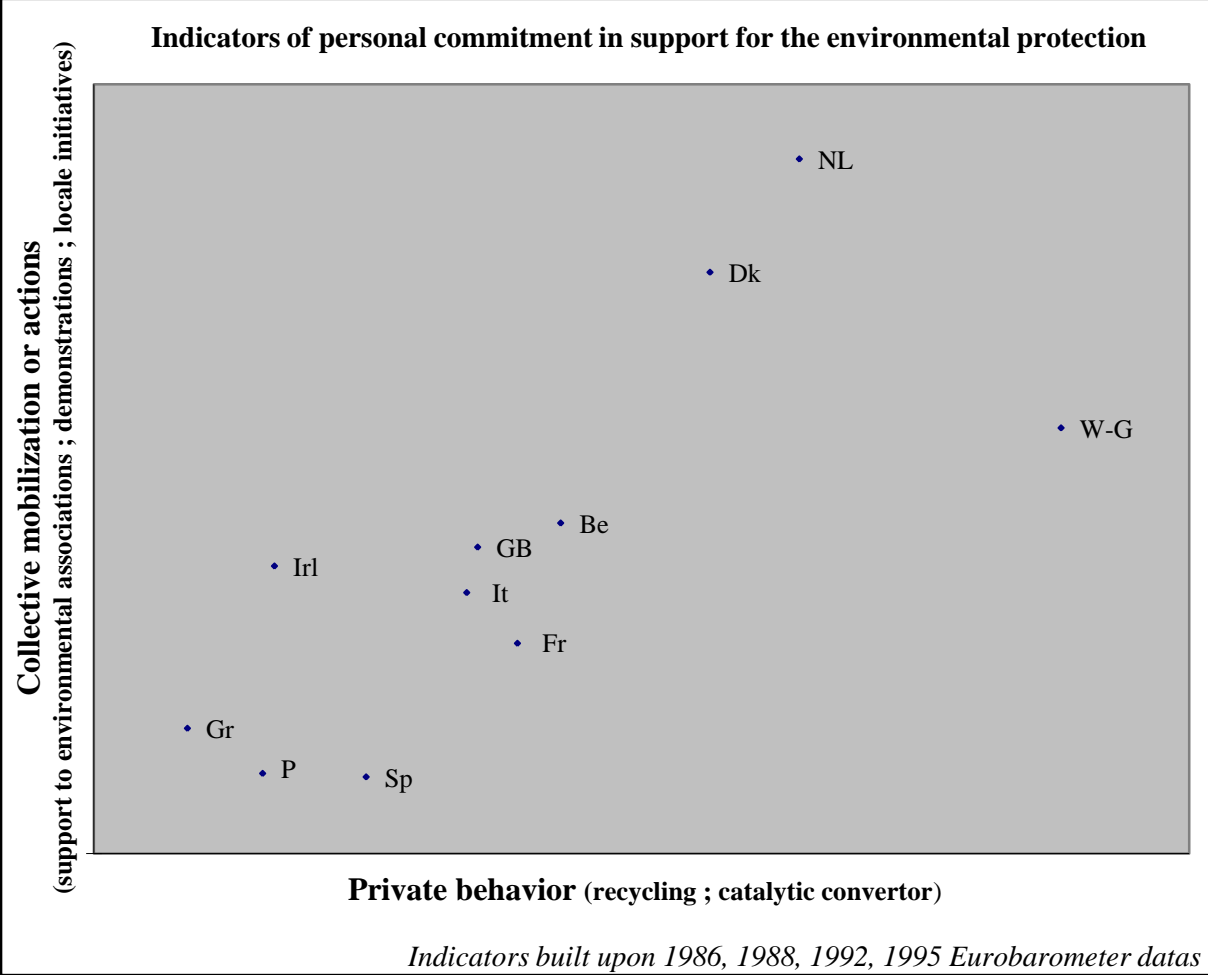
In Germany as well as in the US the discourse on nature provoked by the environmental crisis has been moralist, leading to the search of a new ethic, a new definition of the relationship between man and nature through the development of numerous ethics theories in the field of environmental philosophy (*The Imperative of Responsibility* from Hans Jonas, American ecocentric or biocentric philosophies from Leopold to Callicott, Rolston, deep ecology). In France, environmentalism didn't lead to such theories as in the Germanic or Anglo-Saxon intellectual communities. In France environmental problems have rather been

considered as scientific or technical and that resorting to the experts should be sufficient to solve the environmental crisis (Larrère, Eder).

These specificities of the environmental discourse invite us to consider a religious-based polarization in between ethics, environment appealing to the responsibility of everyone in the protestant areas and politics, environment as in responsibility of public authorities in the catholic countries : a polarization that seems to be at the heart of the differences observed in European environmental attitudes.

• *In the attitudes of the European public*

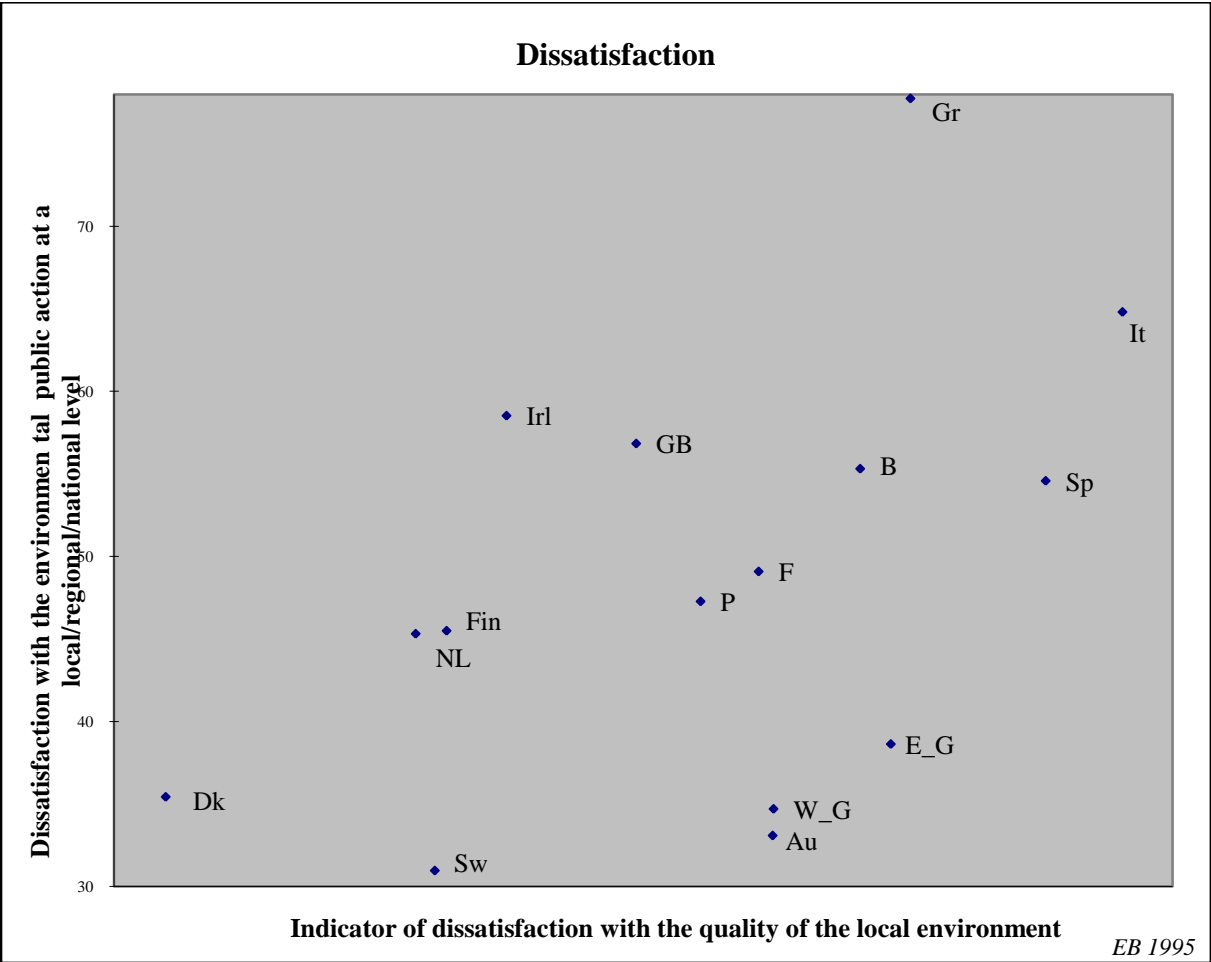
Survey after survey, the Eurobarometer data show that the protestant populations (British people excluded) are the most personally involved in the fight against environmental deterioration through environmentally friendly behaviours and collective mobilization (such as membership in an environmental association).



Regression analysis on the 1986 Eurobarometer data show that the national membership remains the main factor influencing personal environmental actions, even when we take into account the level of education, the standard of life but also the importance dedicated to environmental problems. In 1986 as well as in 1999, we can see that for an equivalent degree

of concern (through ranking environment as a political priority), the Danish, the Dutch and the Germans remain the most involved in the defence of the environment. In other world the strongest adequacy in between values and behaviours observed in protestant countries confirms the idea that the protestant Ethic leads to a better inclination to act along the line of the values one believe in.

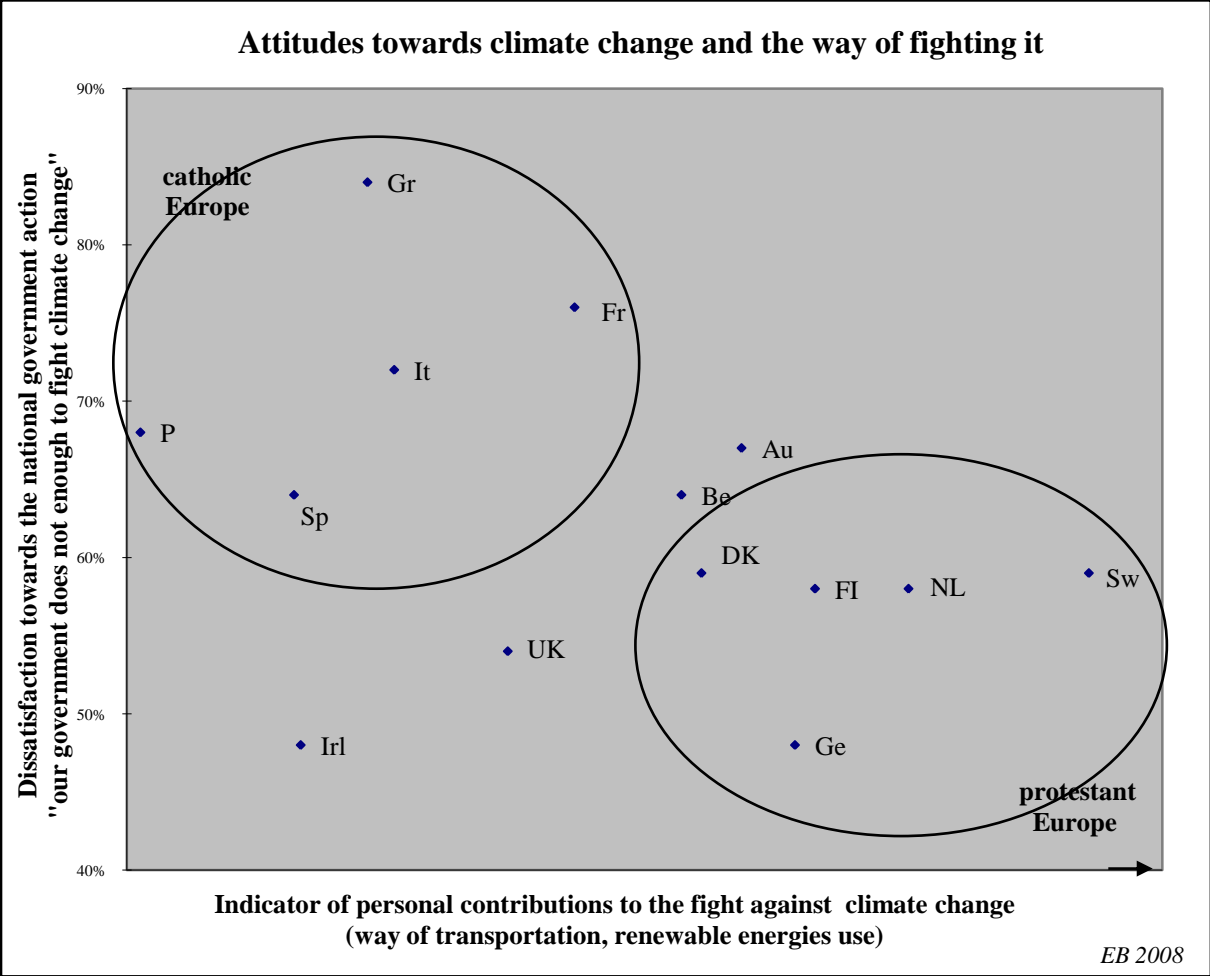
In Catholic countries, the environmental sensitivity takes more the expression of personal complaints: the catholic Europeans are the most dissatisfied with the quality of the local environment as well as with the environmental actions taken by the public authority in their country (as they are also in a general manner more dissatisfied with the democracy in their country and with their personal life as the longitudinal EB data show).



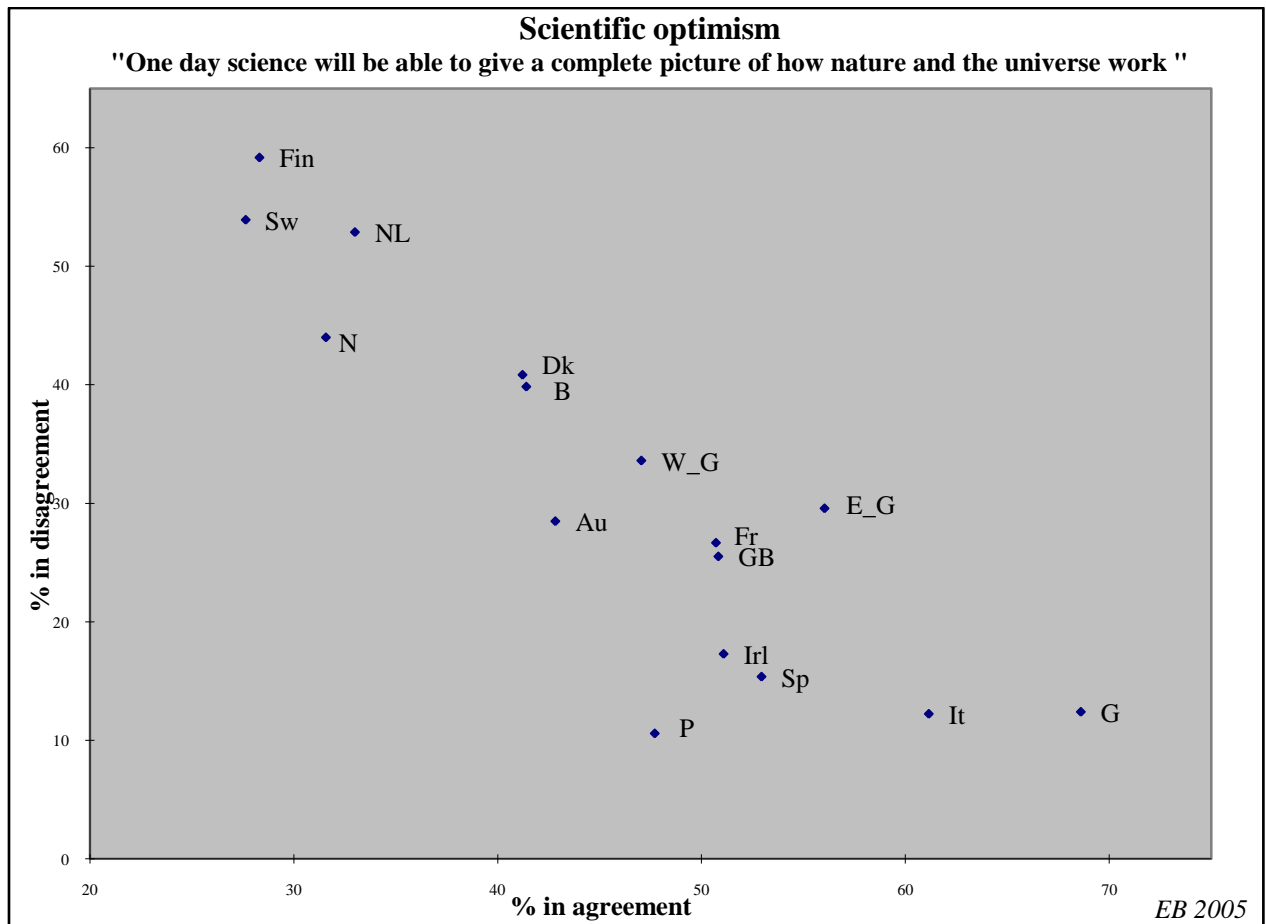
In other words, if the protection of the environment seems to appeal to the moral responsibility of everyone in Northern countries, it looks like that in catholic countries the environment is rather related to the others, depending first on the collective responsibility.

More recent data related to global warming confirms this opposition between individual and collective responsibility as we find again the protestant Europeans (with still an exception for the British people) the more personally involved in the fight against global warming (especially when we considered more restrictive environmentally friendly behaviors) and the

catholic Europeans the more dissatisfied with the environmental action of their national government.

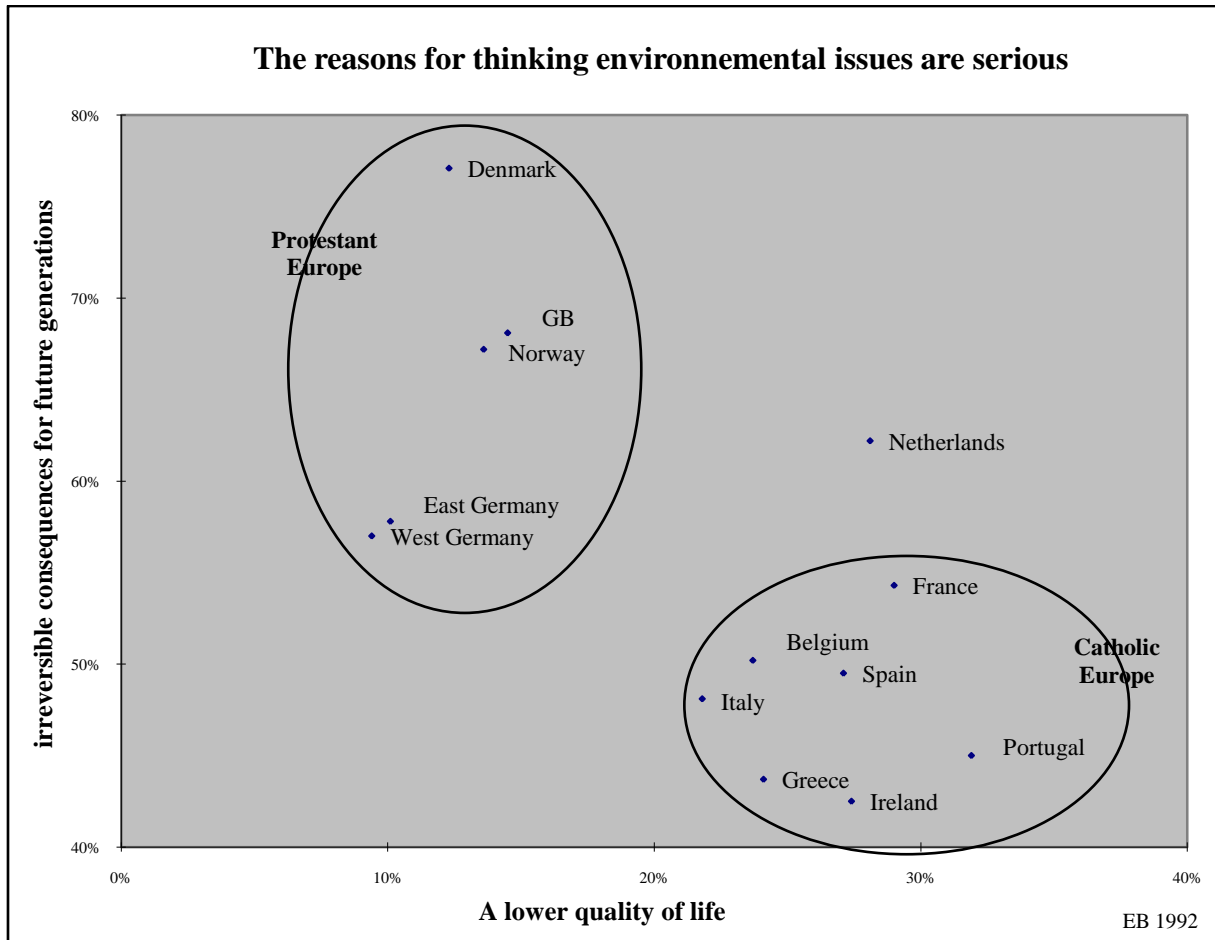


The idea that the environmental crisis requires a lifestyle change appears to strike a higher chord within protestant areas while the recourse to state but also perhaps to science seems stronger in the environmental representations of the catholic populations. Indeed northern protestant Europeans look much more skeptical towards the scientific optimism that for a long time has nourished the idea of progress and the prometheism in western societies. As illustrated below, the image that nature is complex and the scientific understanding of the universe limited is far more widespread within these northern areas.



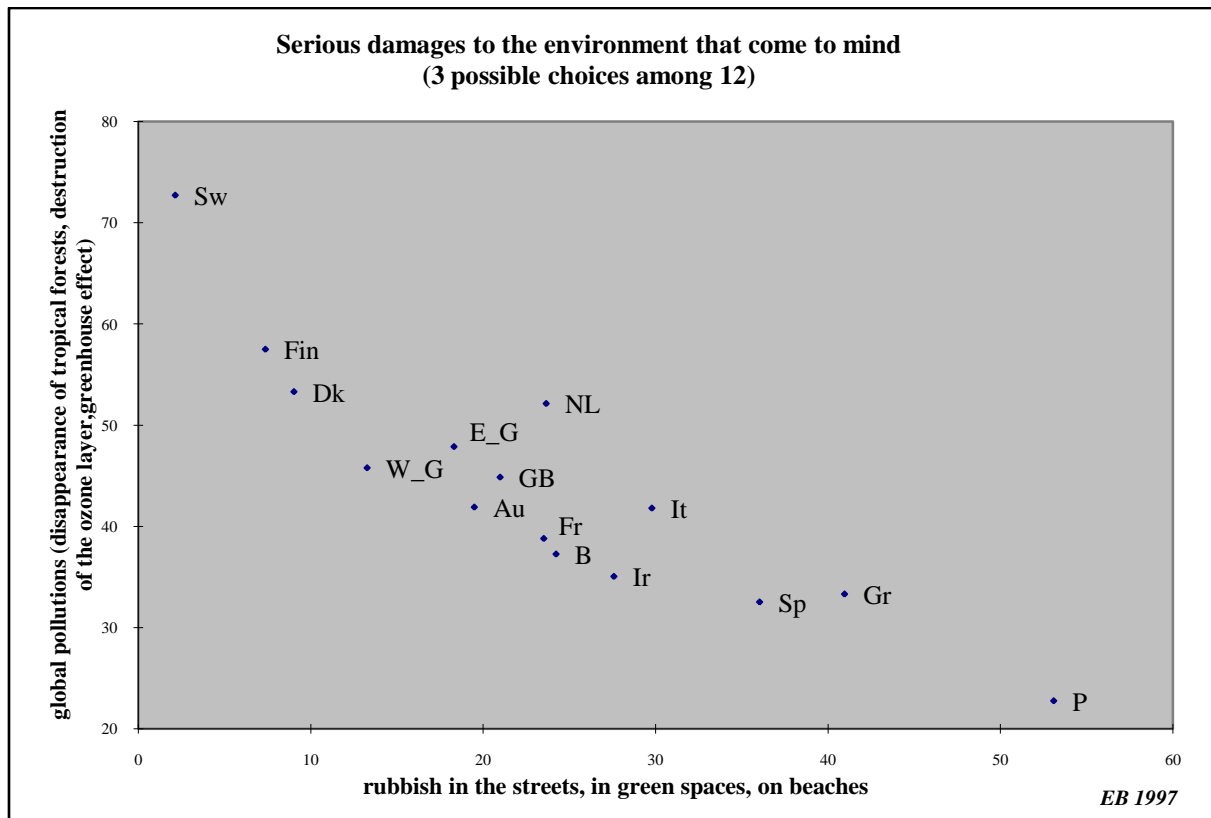
- **The Ethics of future generations**

The idea of a stronger moralization of the environmental discourse within protestant areas shows as well through the concern protestant populations express towards future generations. For example, when we ask Europeans about the reasons for judging environmental damage as serious, citizens originating from protestant countries are in greater number to think about the irreversible consequences for future generations while the fall in the quality of life appears to be a catholic preoccupation.



- Local /global

Another important cleavage in between catholic and protestant environmental conceptions is the local/global dimension. When we asked Europeans about the serious environmental damages that come first to mind, Europeans from protestant countries pay more attention to global pollutions while the problem of rubbish is more considered by catholic Europeans.



From the distant, abstract environment, through the evocation of non directly perceptible threats (“global pollutions”, “irreversible consequences for future generations”) to the local and sensitive environment (“rubbish”, “quality of life”) there is a continuum in the European social representations of nature and the environment that bears the mark of the religious influence. This continuum also suggests an inwards/outwards scale in the way of perceiving the environment through on the one hand the environment as suggestive of life support or sustainability and thus as being part of oneself in Protestant areas, and on the other hand the environment as landscape, as something exterior to humanity in Catholic populations.

Greater awareness of global problems has also to be related to the national media coverage on these issues. Eurobarometer data show that Europeans from protestant countries feel more informed about this kind of danger (such as global warming, destruction of the ozone layer...) as well as they express greater scientific understanding about these global problems (EB 1992, EB 1996, EB 2008). More generally speaking protestant Europeans have also better scientific knowledge (especially the British, the Scandinavians and the Dutch compared to the Portuguese, Irish, Greek and Spanish as testified by the knowledge quiz introduced in European surveys on science) as well as they have a more intense use of the media to get informed of the news (as evidenced by the media use index designed by the Eurobarometers surveys that reveals a clear-cut cleavage from North to South Europe).

If the lower level of education in countries such as Portugal, Spain, Greece or Italy would explain the lower level of scientific knowledge and media use encountered in these countries,

it wouldn't explain the differences observed between England, Germany and Sweden on the one hand and Belgium and France on the other hand.

CONCLUSION

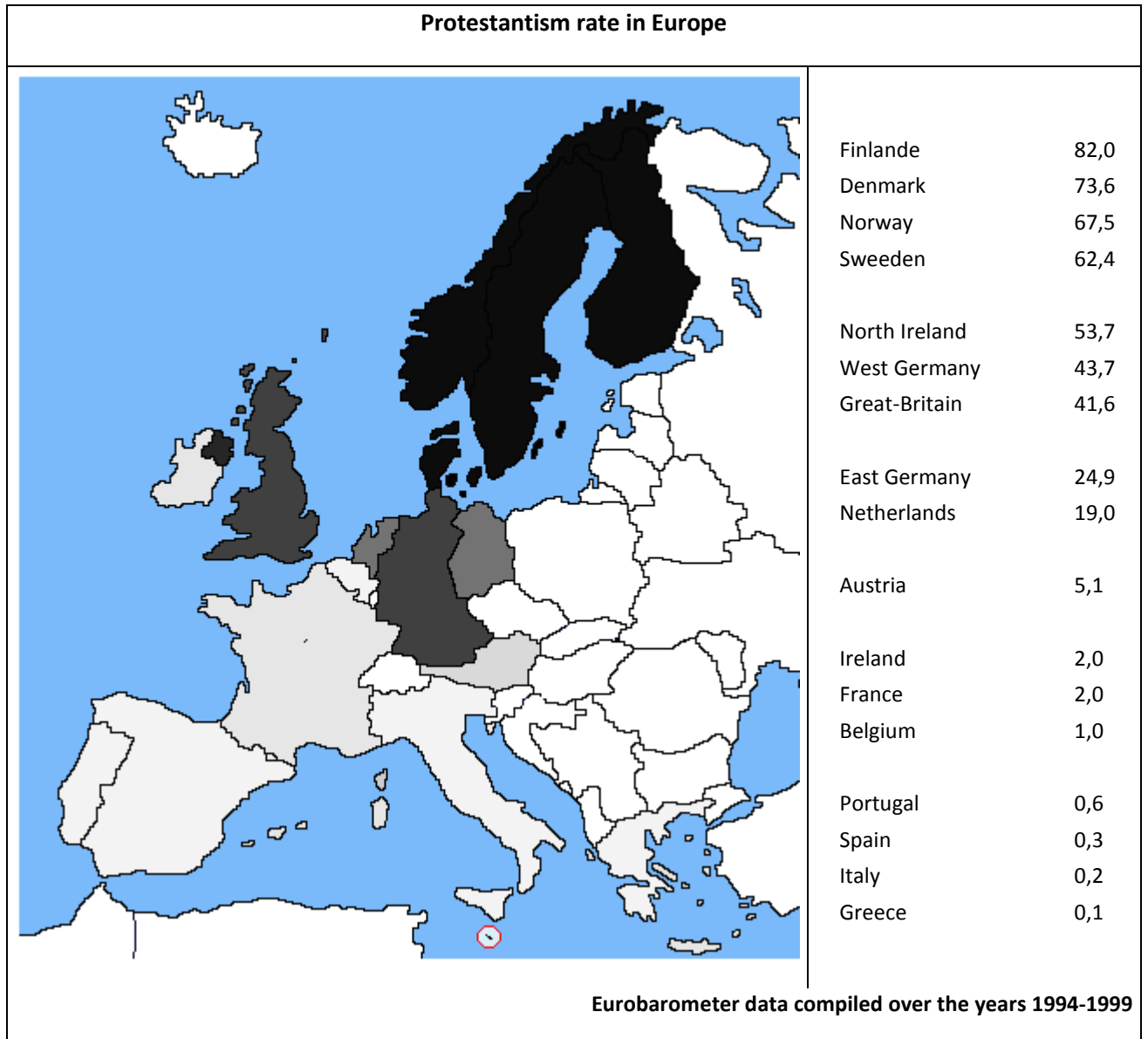
All these results indicate that the environmentalist message emphasising global problems, the complexity of nature and the limits of science capacities, the responsibility of present generations towards future generations, the necessity to change our way of life is much more widespread in northern European countries. The longitudinal Eurobarometer data show indeed a European zone going from Germany (especially during the eighties) to the Scandinavian countries passing through the Netherlands very open to the green values and the ethic of "Thinking globally, acting locally".

These environmental indicators combined with other societal ones let us think that the greater environmental awareness evidenced by the protestant Europeans is also a sign of the stronger involvement or commitment of their citizens to the society debate : better scientifically informed, more intense users of the media, more mobilized in the civil society (through association membership but also syndicate ones), more trusting towards state action... all these ingredients form indeed a favorable environment to the reception of environmental ideas (which are sometimes very complex, from a scientifically point of view) and to the individual environmental actions.

In this European panorama Great-Britain looks like a "Protestant exception" with regards to the relative weak environmental values and commitment of its population. British associative participation remain non negligible and its National Trust continues to be an association that lot of environmentalist envy. But compared to other protestant Europeans the British people express relative low concerns and the question of the influence of the political culture is open : the Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberalism and individualism tending today's towards neo-liberalism, stressing economics priorities and encouraging the state withdrawal forms quite obviously an unfavorable environment to the implantation of green ideas into society. The environmental history of the US is a good example of the harmful consequences of neo-liberalism on environmental politics.

Conversely, Belgium, Austria and to a lesser extent France show a more intermediate position in this green European panorama just like their geographical position within Europe. The influence of Protestantism on green values remains open since these three countries have been more subjected to this religious influence than Mediterranean countries like Spain, Portugal, Greece or Italy (see map below). The existence of a Germanic influence on green attitudes has also to be considered and would explain the proximity of Austrians to the Germans for some aspects of green attitudes and representations, especially in their preference for the "natural" and fears of the "artificial". It shows in a way the influence of a certain intellectual tradition (from the romantics to Steiner and the Frankfurt school thinkers...) and by this the influence of sharing a common intellectual linguistic community.

More than a North/South cleavage, Europeans' environmental attitudes attest a religious based differentiation as Ireland stands in general very close to the catholic Mediterranean people for all the environmental indicators presented in this paper.



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