

# **What kind of environmentalism do we want?**

June 23, 2025 · Cinzia Scaffidi

Simone Vieri

# L'inganno verde

*Contraddizioni e costi dell'ambientalismo europeo*



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The foreword by Stefano Masini, Professor of Agrarian Law and Head of Environmental Affairs at Coldiretti, immediately warns the reader: this will not be a walk in the park.

Indeed, *The Green Deception*, the book by Simone Vieri, demands extra effort compared to the normal level of engagement usually implied by such an essay. More than once, you will be tempted to stop reading, shouting “Why am I doing this?” just to avoid the barrage of controversies raised by the author. In short, as it is trendy to say today, this is a “divisive” book, but not in the sense that it divides readers into two groups: those who agree and those who disagree. No. It is a divisive book for the single reader, who will enthusiastically agree with almost all of the conclusions, while strongly disagreeing with some of the analyses that led to those conclusions.

The unforgettable character of *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger, Holden Caulfield, once said: “The books that leave me breathless are those that, when you finish reading them, you wish the author was your best friend and that you could talk to him on the phone every time you want.”

Well, I would be lucky enough to have that opportunity: I have known Vieri professionally for at least 20 years and could have picked up the phone to bother him with my thoughts. But I believe that his work is an important source of necessary reasoning, and so instead of calling, I proposed a live interview here on Rural Hack in a few days: stay tuned, read this review, then take a few more days if you want to read the book, and then we will have the author available for an hour to answer all our questions.

*The Green Deception* states its goal right from the beginning: “to break free from the unilateral approach through which today topics of great importance, such as the sustainability of the productive systems that impact our lives the most,” namely food and energy, are addressed.

Vieri is an agrarian economist who teaches at the University of Rome, and the first of the two chapters of the book is dedicated to the sustainability of agro-food systems. Sustainability from which we are still far off, and to understand this, just consider one piece of data: “in the face of an agro-industrial production system that manages to produce 22% more than what is needed to feed the entire global population, and waste 30% of what it produces,” we have 31% of the global population facing food insecurity (including 900 million at risk of death from hunger) and another 31% overweight (including 1 billion obese). In short, global

agriculture works at a loss, and the economist's harsh perspective tells us that according to FAO data, there is a gap of about 2000 billion dollars between the total value of the food produced globally (10 billion dollars) and the costs generated by malnutrition, waste, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and health problems resulting from antibiotic resistance.

The cause of such madness, Vieri rightly says, lies in the "development model that has been imposed on agro-food systems in recent decades," oriented primarily toward profit, with control in the hands of fewer and fewer increasingly powerful multinational corporations. This is exactly the challenge that democratic systems should set for themselves, the only transition worth focusing on, because it would consequently enable all the others: "overcoming current development models based on the control of financial oligarchies, whose main effect has been—and will continue to be—to maximize their profits while simultaneously offloading the costs of their distortions onto all of humanity."

Here lies the heart of Vieri's analysis: all of humanity does not just suffer the damage caused by this development system, but is also targeted when it comes to remedying those very same damages, with continuous appeals (and regulations and state incentives) to change behaviors, buying habits, and transportation methods. To all of humanity, or at least to those who can spend a little money, we are asked to buy electric cars, make our homes "green," transition as much as possible from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and buy food with more attention to the planet's health and a series of other virtuous actions. But behind every one of these actions, in the name of transition, lies the need for an "economic transaction," where the seller—following the chain of steps—is always the same actor: the large multinational corporations that control the world of agriculture, livestock, energy, and mobility.

The criticism of the model is clear: the disproportionate inequalities that have been created over time and continue to deepen are not just about wealth and its lack of redistribution. They are also about power: these multinational corporations plug the public debt of States, which consequently do not lift a finger to achieve the transition to new models of development and production. On the contrary, with their regulations in favor of ecological transition, they essentially reaffirm that model, substituting products but not methods. A policy that ultimately delegates to these giants of finance and production the control and management of strategic sectors for every country, such as agriculture and energy.

The European Union is no exception to this mechanism, with its Green Deal, born from the Kyoto Protocol, which no longer exists and which, in any case, did not yield the expected results. This is why a rethinking of the Green Deal is urgently needed. However, Vieri, who dedicates the second chapter of his book to the environment and ecological transition, goes even further. If we want to seriously consider sustainable agro-food systems at the European level, we must begin by questioning the fact that agriculture has, since the Uruguay Round (1986-1993), become one of the sub-sectors of trade regulated by the WTO. No agricultural policy at the European level will be able to act with the objective of territorial development, biodiversity, and the balanced management of natural resources necessary for agro-food production if it must first obey trade policy rules developed by an organization designed to protect free markets and incentivize exports.

In this vision, a reconsideration of the Green Deal is essential, also to prevent inequalities from deepening and creating a kind of “civil war” of regulations and market access between farmers in the global South and farmers in the global North, or even between organic and conventional farmers in the same global North.

The quantity and quality of insights offered by *The Green Deception* are such that a review cannot do them justice, and indeed the task of a review is to make you want to read the book, which I wholeheartedly recommend.

However, I would like not to overlook what I consider to be the weak points of the analysis, even while agreeing with the conclusions. Let's say I fully agree on the merits but not always on the methods.

Specifically, three main issues struck me critically: the first is related to Vieri's criticism of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), which he claims has attributed climate change solely to anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This is inaccurate: the IPCC is a scientific intergovernmental forum that does not conduct research; it analyzes and evaluates climate research conducted worldwide. Therefore, no studies are “excluded” from the IPCC because it is a panel specifically created to constantly update the available knowledge on climate. Non-anthropogenic causes of climate change are taken into consideration by the IPCC, and all available knowledge is provided to the United Nations and, thus, to governments. It is there, in the political arena, where decisions are made that determine environmental policies, but the IPCC has neither the authority nor could it have it. Specifically, the IPCC has created three working groups: the first studies how the climate

works, which is essentially the result of the balance between incoming energy (from the sun to the Earth) and outgoing energy (from the Earth to the sun); the second group studies the impacts of climate change; and a third group focuses on what can be done to ensure that anthropogenic causes of climate change do not outweigh natural causes: from 1850 to today, anthropogenic causes have increased and today are roughly equal to natural causes (solar activity, volcanic activity, ocean currents...), which have remained essentially constant over time. There is also a task force responsible for identifying the scientific methodologies to uniformly assess, for all nations, the emissions and absorptions (sources and sinks) of greenhouse gases: without a unified methodology, it would be impossible to make the annual balance that each country is required to do (in Italy, it is done by ISPRA).

It is true that the IPCC does not deal with pollution, but not in an absolute sense: the IPCC, by its statutes, must focus on climate, so it only deals with pollutants that have “radiative forcing,” meaning those that affect the climate. If a pollutant has consequences for human health but not for the climate, it is not considered by the IPCC. But to say that the IPCC identifies the causes of climate change solely and exclusively in anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is a far cry, and dismissing the work of thousands of researchers over almost forty years as nonsense does a disservice to the rigor and undeniable documentation work that characterizes much of Vieri’s text.

Another point where I disagree with Vieri’s opinion concerns the weight of Europe: the EU’s emissions account for 6% of global emissions, as the text states, and therefore even if we reduce them by 55% by 2030, little will change for the planet, especially considering that emissions from other countries are much higher and, in some cases, even growing (this, however, does not apply to China, the world’s largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter, which, from 2005 to 2020, reduced its emissions by 48%, although Vieri includes China among countries whose emissions are growing). If, as Vieri continues, to reduce our insignificant share of emissions, we risk the stability of entire production sectors, particularly agro-food and automotive, then the author argues, the game isn’t worth the candle, and it’s better to stick to fossil fuels, since the transition to renewable technologies must go through Chinese production capacity, and thus some of their emissions concern us directly.

But then, how do we deal with the possibility of change? If we don’t imagine change as the result of a snap of the fingers, which instantly produces new conditions and situations, the only alternative can be gradualism, perhaps guided by one of the most important internal

markets, the European one, which, with the rules it manages to establish (rules, we repeat, that need to be reconsidered and revised in their implementation but not eliminated in their intent), tries to prevent the circulation of goods (especially food) of worse “climatic,” environmental, and nutritional quality (i.e., regarding public health). The point, therefore, is not how much European emissions can change the global situation, but, as Vieri rightly points out elsewhere in the book, the development model tied to a liberalism that has now proven toxic in every sense, including the literal one.

Finally, I am puzzled by the condescending attitude that Vieri transmits towards the current Trump administration. After justly and fiercely criticizing the development model that has made politics almost subservient to the great powers of finance and production, Vieri seems to welcome the full completion of the overlap between these two sectors, which, in the world’s most powerful country, led to the election of “the richest man on the planet” and undeniably a representative of those financial oligarchies and production monopolies—and especially the media—that are rightly criticized in the book. Trump’s merit, according to Vieri, would be declaring war on green policies because “they no longer deliver more than they cost,” thus exposing the finance sector, which has already repositioned itself accordingly. Vieri’s “benevolence” toward Trump stems from the belief that his policies, no more capitalist than those of Europe, are oriented towards national sovereignty; in other words, Trump would act for the good of his country, while the EU “seems to respond solely to financial oligarchies and intellectual elites that support them, without caring about the costs imposed on citizens and businesses.” But this reasoning seems to overlook one detail: Trump is exactly the representative of those oligarchies, and from the perspective of emissions, waste, and per capita pollution (in absolute terms, China is still in the lead), the United States is the mirror in which we can see the reflection of all the damage created by the development model that both Vieri and I believe should be fought against. If Vieri hopes, in other parts of his text, for a spiritual reconnection of people with the Earth, the spread of food education, and the focus of politics on biodiversity in a broad sense (from productions to territories to local knowledge), how can he then entertain the idea that the “Trump cyclone” could become the catalyst for virtuous policies and collective awareness? The cost-benefit analysis, so dear to economists and thus also to Vieri, must be done properly, or we end up just singing half a hymn, that is, only the one that serves the reasoning we are conducting at the time.

Finally, it is precisely by returning to the idea of calculating costs and benefits that I want to conclude by strongly recommending this book. The costs, however, are not certain: only some might expect a little nervousness and indigestion. The benefits, on the other hand, are sure and abundant, and mainly lie in the ability to analyze these issues with disillusionment, intellectual honesty, and abandoning a series of clichés that have caused considerable damage in the history of environmentalist thought. It is a valuable intellectual opportunity, and therefore political.

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Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/the-green-deception-contradictions-costs-european-environmentalism/>