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*Heat waves kill thousands in Europe, but politicians resist the relief Americans can take for granted.*

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### Air Conditioning, Scourge of the French Left

By Alexander Kustov

As the latest heat wave discomforts Europe, France is arguing about air conditioning. Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally supports issuing €20 billion (about \$23 billion) in interest-free loans to buy 30 million to 40 million units and insulation. The French left argues that air conditioning is a selfish indulgence and an ecological menace. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the country's most prominent left-wing leader, warned that cooling would mean "increasing the damage," and says he wouldn't expose his grandchildren to air conditioning because it "destroys your sinuses."

To an American, this is disorienting. Nearly 90% of U.S. households have air conditioning. But in much of Europe, cooling is a hot issue on which the populist right has the better side of the argument.

That should unsettle American progressives, who assume the far right is consistently irrational while the left is the party of science. On air conditioning, the opposite is closer to the truth. Keeping people cool in a deadly heat wave is humane and politically smart. It is the kind of help ordinary citizens can see for themselves and appreciate.

Summer heat is dangerous. In France, a single heat wave killed nearly 15,000 people in 2003. Across Europe, more than 61,000 people died in record heat in 2022. Air conditioning is the cure. The economist Alan Barreca and his colleagues found that the spread of home cooling explains most of the decline in "hot-day-related fatalities" in the U.S. since 1960.

Few advances have won people over so completely. In 1973 only about a quarter of Americans called home air conditioning a necessity. By 2006, 7 in 10 did.

Critics of air conditioning have a point about the amount of energy required. <sup>Note</sup> By the International Energy Agency's count, cooling uses close to one-tenth of the world's electricity. During last summer's heat wave, air conditioning helped raise demand in parts of Europe by 14%, past the usual winter peak, and it helped trigger outages in Italy. By 2050, the World Resources Institute estimates, cooling could emit 6.1 billion tons of carbon dioxide a year, close to one-fifth of all emissions.

Critically, that 2050 figure assumes a dirty grid; a clean one, like the one France has built, makes the problem largely disappear. Air conditioning accounts for about 3% of global emissions today, and in France, where two-thirds of the power is nuclear and much of the rest is low-carbon, running a unit is close to carbon-free.

Why doesn't that realization carry the day? The answer can be found in a deeper current of left-liberal thought that has nothing to do with science or engineering.

In early June, a group of leftwing economists, among them Joseph Stiglitz, Thomas Piketty and Kate Raworth, declared economic growth "a doomed strategy" and signed on in support of a road map, developed by United Nations Special Rapporteur Olivier De Schutter, for a new "degrowth economy." Its policies aim to reduce material consumption,

shorten the workweek, and impose caps on personal income. Underlying this road map is the idea that wanting to be comfortable is shameful.

Ordinary French people seem to think so. This spring, Ipsos found that 84% of them consider air conditioning effective against the heat, but only 22% own a unit, even though most can afford it. Ms. Le Pen saw the opportunity in these numbers and hasn't let go. The people who get lectured about "energy sobriety" and told to endure, she likes to point out, are rarely the ones with cool offices and cool cars.

Defenders of the "European way" will say that none of this is ideological. Nobody actually opposes air conditioning, they insist; the buildings are simply old and hard to retrofit. Heat waves pass, and it's more practical to cover your windows with cardboard. True, old buildings are harder to cool. But when a society decides something is worth doing, it finds a way.

Opposition to cooling is written into the law in Europe. In France, a condominium owner generally needs the consent of the other owners to install air conditioning. In the country's heritage zones, a state architect can veto any unit visible from the street. In England and Wales, an air conditioner that has no heating function requires permission. The canton of Geneva issues a permit for comfort cooling only to people who prove they need it. Spain forbids public and commercial buildings from cooling below 80 degrees.

When it comes to air conditioning, with people dying in the heat, the populists are simply correct. The left's most respectable voices are telling grandmothers to draw down the shutters and wait it out. You don't have to like Ms. Le Pen, or agree with her on immigration, to admit she has this one right. Caring about evidence means being willing to say so out loud, even when the side that has lost the thread is your own.

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