

ECOLOGISM AND THE POLITICS OF SENSIBILITIES

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Ecologism, or green political theory, has been regarded as a distinctive ideological tradition since about 1970s. In some senses it is the most radical of political ideologies, being prepared to go where no other ideology will go in challenging established moral and philosophical beliefs as well as conventional lifestyles. But how does ecologism differ from other political ideologies? And what different trends and tendencies does it encompass?

Ecologism takes ideological thinking in novel and challenging directions. Its starting place is largely or entirely ignored by other political ideologies: the idea of an intrinsic relationship between humankind and nature (or non-human nature, to avoid confusion with the notion of 'human nature'). Of course, there is nothing new about this belief. The idea that human society is part of, or at least intimately connected to, the natural world is taken for granted in most traditional cultures and is a core belief of pagan religions and most Eastern religions. However, such ideas only gained an ideological character when they were invested with political significance. This occurred due to the tendency of industrialisation to divorce humankind from nature, the latter increasingly being seen merely in economic terms, as a resource available to satisfy human ends. In that sense, ecologism emerged as, and has always constituted, a critique of industrial civilisation. As urban and industrial life spread in the 19th century, thinkers such as the UK libertarian socialist William Morris (1834-96) and the Russian anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) developed a form of socialist pastoralism that prefigured later eco-socialism. During the twentieth century, pastoral sentiments were most likely to surface in right-wing political doctrines, not least in the 'blood and soil' ideas of the German Nazis. Though starkly different in other respects, both left- and right-wing pastoralism tended to subscribe to an organic theory of society that highlighted parallels between social and natural structures and so implied a connectedness between humankind and nature.

Such thinking, nevertheless, only acquired a fully ideological character through the rise of the green or environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, ecologism was widely viewed as an ideology in its own right, due to three main theoretical developments. First, a greater emphasis on the principle of ecology encouraged thinkers to construct ideas about interconnectedness, holism and natural balance that went beyond a mere pressure-group-like concern for the environment, commonly called 'environmentalism'. Ecology, in other words, provided the basis for an ecocentric 'world view'. Second, there was a growing recognition that the threat to the environment had an important ideological dimension in the form of anthropocentrism, the human-centred bias that characterises conventional ethical thinking and philosophical belief. Third, the emergence of so-called 'deep' ecology, which embraced a fully ecocentric worldview that rejected anthropocentrism altogether, established a form of ecological

thinking that could not be accommodated within existing ideologies, or within hybrid ideological forms such as eco-socialism, eco-anarchism or eco-feminism. In shifting ideological thinking onto radically new terrain, deep ecology has a significance that parallels that of radical feminism within the feminist tradition.

Ecologism – key concepts

Ecology: As a distinct branch of biology, ecology focuses on the ways in which plants and animals are sustained by self-regulating natural systems – ecosystems – composed of both living and non-living elements. Ecology implies both interconnectedness and equilibrium, as all ecosystems tend towards a state of harmony through a system of self-regulation.

Ecocentrism: An approach to understanding that prioritises the maintenance of ecological balance over the achievement of human ends. Only deep ecologists fully embrace ecocentrism.

Anthropocentrism: Human-centredness; the belief that human needs and interests are of overriding moral and philosophical importance. Anthropocentrism is the opposite of eco-centrism.

Shallow ecology: A green ideological perspective that harnesses the lessons of ecology to human needs and ends, and is associated with values such as sustainability and conservation; humanist ecology.

Deep ecology: A green ideological perspective that rejects anthropocentrism and gives priority to the maintenance of nature, and is associated with values such as biocentric equality, diversity and decentralisation.

Holism: A belief that the whole is more important than its parts; holism implies that understanding is gained by studying relationships between the parts.

Industrialism: A term used by green theorists to refer to economic arrangements, reflected in both capitalism and socialism, that favour large-scale production, the accumulation of capital and relentless growth.

Environmentalism: A concern about the natural environment and particularly the desire to reduce environmental degradation; a policy orientation rather than an ideological stance (unlike ecologism).

Pastoralism: A belief in the virtues of rural existence: simplicity, community and a closeness to nature, in contrast to the corrupting influence of urban and industrialised life.

The politics of sensibilities

What new ideological terrain has ecologism uncovered? How has ecologism extended ideological thought? Through the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century, political ideology had a strong economic focus. The classical ideologies, notably liberalism and socialism, engaged in what can be called the *politics of material distribution*. They offered contrasting answers to the question: 'who should get what?' Ideological debate therefore tended to boil down to a clash between rival economic models: capitalism and socialism. By contrast, most of the so-called 'new' ideologies that have emerged since the 1960s – second-wave feminism, ethnocultural nationalism, religious fundamentalism and multiculturalism – subscribe to the *politics of identity*. In offering alternative answers to the question 'who are we?', they have emphasised the political importance of, variously, gender, ethnicity, religion and culture.

Ecologism, for its part, differs from both the politics of material distribution and the politics of identity. Indeed, in important ways, ecologism has both a post-material and a post-identity orientation. It is post-material in that, to a greater or lesser degree, it views economics as the enemy of ecology, materialism being a form of intellectual and spiritual corruption that results in an alienation from nature. As a form of post-identity politics, ecologism transcends conventional conceptions of identity because, by questioning, and trying to weaken, the divide between the human and natural worlds, it dispenses with human-centred notions of selfhood, whether individual or collective. So what kind of politics does ecologism practice? Ecologism is deeper and, in a sense, more radical than other political ideologies because it practises the *politics of sensibilities*, sensibilities referring to levels of awareness or discernment. By attempting to re-orientate people's relationship with, and appreciation of, the non-human – the world 'out there' – ecologism sets out to do nothing less than transform human consciousness and expand the range of our moral responsibilities. As such, ecologism, especially in the form of deep ecology, deals with issues of ontology, that is, issues concerning the nature of being, existence or reality in general.

However, not all ecologists think alike. Ecologism can be divided into three broad categories, as follows:

- Modernist ecology
- Social ecology
- Deep ecology.

Modernist ecology

Modernist ecology has an essentially reformist character, in that it seeks to reconcile the principle of ecology with the central features of capitalist modernity (individual self-seeking, materialism,

economic growth and so on). It is thus very clearly a form of 'shallow' or humanist ecology. The key feature of modernist ecology is the recognition that there are 'limits to growth', in that environmental degradation (in the form, for instance, of pollution or the use of non-renewable resources) ultimately threatens prosperity and economic performance. The watchword of this form of ecologism is therefore sustainable development, sustainability being the capacity of a system to maintain its health and continue in existence over a period of time. In economic terms, this means 'getting richer slower'. Modernist ecology thus extends moral and philosophical sensibilities only in modest directions. Indeed, it is often condemned by more radical ecologists as hopelessly compromised: part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Nevertheless, influenced by modern liberalism, it practices what can be called 'enlightened' anthropocentrism, encouraging individuals to take account of long-term, and not merely short-term, interests and to favour 'higher' pleasures (such as an appreciation of nature) over 'lower' pleasures (such as material consumption). Similarly, the idea of sustainable development is supported by a theory of intergenerational justice in which the present generation has obligations towards future generations (in particular, to ensure that they enjoy at least the same levels of material prosperity). Such thinking has been influenced by, amongst other things, a traditional conservative, and specifically Burkean, notion of tradition in which society is viewed as a partnership between the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born. However, there are important differences within modernist ecology, particularly over the proper balance between the state and capitalism. Whereas most modernist ecologists favour state intervention (on the grounds that environmental degradation is an externality or a 'social cost', unrecognised by the market), some even calling for the construction of an authoritarian 'green state', others champion the cause of so-called 'green capitalism', which basically relies on market forces to dictate a shift towards more ecologically-sound consumption and production patterns.

Social ecology

Social ecology is a term coined by the US anarchist social philosopher, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), to refer to the idea that ecological principles can and should be applied to social organisation, in which case an anarchist commune can be thought of as an ecosystem. However, the term can be used more broadly to refer to a range of ideas that each recognise that the destruction the environment is dictated by, or linked to, existing social structures. The advance of ecological principles therefore requires a process of radical social change. However, social ecology, thus defined, encompasses three distinct ecological traditions:

- Eco-socialism
- Eco-anarchism
- Eco-feminism

Eco-socialism advances an environmental critique of capitalism: in short, capitalism is the enemy of nature, while socialism is its friend. In this view, capitalism's anti-ecological bias derives from a number of sources. For instance, private property encourages the belief that humans have domination over nature; the market economy 'commodifies' nature in the sense that it turns it into something only has use-value and can be bought and sold; and the capitalist system breeds materialism and consumerism and so leads to relentless growth. Most green parties, in their early years, thus followed the pioneering example of the German Greens, in trying to reconcile 'red' and 'green' priorities. However, as the often appalling environmental record of state socialist societies were more widely recognised, eco-socialism gradually lost its appeal.

Eco-anarchism advances an environmental critique of hierarchy and authority: in short, domination over other people is linked to domination over nature. Decentralisation, self-management and direct democracy are therefore a recipe for an ecological balance within society as well as for a balance between humankind and nature. Anarchist sensibilities have influenced the green movement in a variety of ways, ranging from a general suspicion of authority and leadership structures (green parties have often favoured the idea of collective leadership) to a willingness, at times, to employ tactics of direct action.

Eco-feminism advances an environmental critique of patriarchy: in short, domination over women leads to domination over nature. Most eco-feminists believe that there are essential (biologically-rooted and not merely cultural) differences between men and women. Men are the enemy of nature because their reliance on instrumental reason allows them to understand the natural world only in terms of use-value, while women live in harmony with nature by virtue of their ability to engage with it at a deeper psycho-emotional level. Eco-feminism is therefore the point at which feminist essentialism overlaps with deep ecology.

Deep ecology

The term deep ecology was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), to distinguish ecological philosophy ('ecosophy') from 'shallow' or humanist ecology. Deep ecology emphasises the need for paradigm change, that is, for a change in our core thinking and assumptions about the world. Specifically, it calls for the adoption of a radically new philosophical and moral perspective to replace conventional mechanistic and atomistic thinking. It advocates a radical holism that dispenses altogether with anthropocentric ideas and assumptions. Interconnectedness is the central theme of all forms of deep ecology, but these have been constructed on a variety of bases, ranging from the new physics (particularly quantum mechanics) and systems theory to Eastern mysticism and especially Buddhism and Taoism. Such ecocentric paradigms have encouraged deep ecologists to extend moral and philosophical thinking in a number of radical directions.

Buddhism as a basis for deep ecology

Growing interest in deep ecology has coincided with a greater awareness of forms of Eastern mysticism. The philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism (the form of Buddhism that is practiced in countries such as Tibet, China and Japan) has been particularly influential in this respect, because of its stress on interconnectedness and impermanence. This is most clearly expressed through the idea of 'emptiness', the belief that all entities lack own-being, in the sense that they have not concrete existence in and of themselves. This applies to doctrines and theories, as well as to animate and inanimate objects, including individual human beings – hence the idea of 'no-self'. Emptiness is explained by the notion of dependent co-origination, which holds that, as everything is changing and dependant on something else, there is nothing solid in which we can trust. Such thinking is radically holistic, and, in ecological terms, places an emphasis on the 'web of life', rather than on the interests of any single species.

Deep ecologists, for example, champion the cause of biocentric equality, in which all species share a 'universal right to bloom and flourish' (Naess). This suggests that any attempt to place the interests of humans above those of animals or other species is an example of 'speciesism', an irrational prejudice akin to racism or sexism. Furthermore, deep ecologists emphasise the intrinsic value of nature (value-in-nature), highlighting the idea that ethical value derives from nature itself, particularly when it is unspoilt by human interference, by contrast with conventional moral thinking which bases value on nature's ability to satisfy human ends. The economic thinking of deep ecology tends to favour 'strong' sustainability - not merely the desire to prevent present actions from imperilling the prosperity of future generations but, rather, a rejection of growth-for-its-own-sake in favour of an acceptance of more meagre living standards based on a desire to reduce our 'ecological footprint'. Finally, deep ecologists have re-evaluated selfhood and the nature of human happiness. Through ideas such as the 'ecological self', they have portrayed human beings as more as perceiving subjects (defined by what they experience) rather than as perceived objects (defined by their name, family status, gender, nationality, occupation and so on). Such an 'inter-subjective' model of the selfhood allows for no distinction between the self and 'the other', or the world 'out there', thus collapsing the distinction between humankind and nature. In this light, happiness should be defined in terms of 'being' rather than 'having', human fulfilment stemming more from an appreciation of nature 'as it is', instead of from manipulating and exploiting nature for economic benefit.