

“Green” Politics: Ecology as Ideology

Only connect. . . .

E.M. Forster, *Howards End*

All ideologies are born of crisis. Starting from a shared sense that something is wrong, that the world is not as it should be, ideologies attempt to explain or account for puzzling or problematic features of people's lives; then, on the basis of these explanations, they offer diagnoses and prescriptions for the ills of a troubled time. The ideology we examine in the present chapter is certainly no exception to this rule. Although many of its ideas are quite old, this ideology is quite new—so new, in fact, that it has, as yet, no generally agreed-upon name. But because many within this movement call their perspective **Green politics** and themselves “Greens,” we will refer to them and their ideology in this way.¹

The crisis out of which a broadly based Green movement has emerged is the environmental crisis. Actually, this is not a single crisis but a series of crises arising in connection with the ecological and environmental damage wrought by population growth, pollution of air and water, the destruction of the tropical rain forests, the rapid extinction of entire species of plants and animals, the greenhouse effect (the warming of the earth's atmosphere), the destruction of forests and lakes by acid rain, the depletion of the earth's protective ozone layer, and other now-familiar instances of environmental damage and degradation.

These crises are interconnected. All, moreover, are the result of human actions and practices over the last two centuries. Many are by-products of technological innovations, such as the internal combustion engine. But the causes of these environmental crises, according to many environmentalists, are as much ideological as they are technological. They stem, that is, from ideas and ideologies that place human beings above or apart from nature. Against these, an emerging Green movement proposes its own *counter-ideology*, which has two main aspects. This counter-ideology consists, first of all, of a critique of some of the key assumptions underlying the ideologies that have long dominated modern politics. And second, it attempts to offer a more positive and hopeful vision of human beings' relation with the natural environment and with one another.

This does not mean that we should think of advocates of a green or environmental ideology as exclusively “liberal” or left-leaning. Some call themselves “conservative environmentalists” in the tradition of Edmund Burke, who wrote that each generation has a duty to leave to posterity “an habitation,” not a “ruin.”² Others call themselves free-market or libertarian environmentalists because they believe that free-market competition and private ownership of property are the best means of protecting the natural environment.³ Still others proceed from the religious premise that the earth is God’s creation that human beings may not exploit or despoil it for momentary pleasure or profit. Nature, they contend, is to be treated with reverence, which is to say that humans have an obligation to care for and be good stewards of God’s creation.⁴

There are differences among Greens, then, just as there are differences among liberals, conservatives, socialists, and the adherents of other ideologies. But there is little disagreement about the urgency of the need to rethink our attitudes toward and actions within the natural environment.

THE GREEN CRITIQUE OF OTHER IDEOLOGIES

To devise and act upon an alternative environmental ideology, say the Greens, is not merely one option among many. It may be the only remaining chance that human beings have to save the planet and its myriad species—including the human species itself. And this is because the human species is linked to, and deeply dependent upon, other species of plants and animals. All are, in a word, interdependent. To see this interdependence in action, consider the tale of the tree. Trees are a source not only of shade and lumber but of oxygen, which they exchange for the carbon dioxide (CO₂) that is a by-product of burning and other processes of oxidation, including our own breathing: approximately twenty times per minute we breathe in a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen, exhaling CO₂ with every breath. To clear tropical rain forests or to destroy northern forests with acid rain is therefore to reduce the amount of oxygen available for us and other creatures to breathe. This in turn increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which results in the further warming of the earth’s atmosphere known as “the greenhouse effect.” This global warming in its turn brings drought, transforms formerly fertile land into deserts and dust bowls, and thereby reduces crop production, which means that humans and animals go hungry or perhaps even starve. It will also bring in its wake the gradual melting of the polar ice caps, thereby raising sea levels and permanently flooding many low-lying coastal areas, including most of Florida and much of countries like Bangladesh.

The moral of the tale of the tree is simply this: all things are connected. Or, to put the point another way: what goes around comes around. In one sense, of course, this is not an entirely new message. All of the world’s great religions have said much the same thing in one way or another. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). This is true not only of individuals but of human beings from one generation to another. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2). In other words, what human beings do in one time and place will affect other human beings, and

other species, in other times and places. All actions, however small, can have large and long-lasting consequences.

But while the world's major religions have taught that all things are interconnected, most of the major modern ideologies have not. It is for this reason that the Greens tend to be quite critical of other ideologies, **right and left alike**. They criticize not only the specific beliefs and doctrines of those other ideologies but, no less important, their *unexamined assumptions* as well. ☆

Consider, for example, the assumptions about nature and human beings' relationship to nature shared by several modern ideologies. Liberals, socialists, and individualist conservatives share a similar attitude toward nature, one that celebrates the ever-increasing human "conquest" or "mastery" of nature. They see nature as either a hostile force to be conquered or a resource base to be harnessed for such human purposes as "growth" and "economic development." Technological, scientific, and economic progress is therefore to be measured in terms of the human species' power over nature. Such an adversarial attitude was expressed early on by seventeenth-century thinkers, including Thomas Hobbes's friend Sir Francis Bacon. Indeed, Bacon speaks of nature much as the Marquis de Sade was later to speak of women. Nature (always "her") is haughty and proud but must be subdued, humbled, and humiliated by "man," whose sense of power increases with his "conquest" of nature. Nature must be "interrogated," "subdued," and made to "yield up her secrets" to man, Bacon declared, so that man can then turn nature's secrets against her, "shaping nature as on an anvil." Through their technology men do not "merely exert a gentle guidance over nature's course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations." Finally, "by art and the hand of man she is forced out of her natural state, and squeezed and moulded" for human purposes.⁵ Similarly, though less "sadistically," John Locke believed that nature in itself was without value. It is only when people put "waste" land and resources to human use that they acquire whatever "value" they have: "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing."⁶ (By "benefit" Locke meant *human* benefit; "waste land" is of enormous benefit to the non-human creatures who inhabit it.) And Karl Marx, critical as he was of capitalism and the liberal ideology that justified it, nevertheless waxed enthusiastic about the increased power over nature that capitalism had brought about: ☆

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured up out of the ground—what earlier century had even a pre-sentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?⁷

In light of these views, the Greens say that it is scarcely surprising that liberal capitalist and communist societies are alike in sharing the bias called **anthropocentrism**.⁸ Both tend to prefer economic "growth" and productivity to the protection of the natural environment. Nor is it surprising, they say, that rivers

like the Volga and the Mississippi are little more than open sewers and that the lakes and fish and pine trees of Siberia and New England and Canada are being poisoned by acid rain. And although the Soviet Union was the scene of the world's worst nuclear accident to date—at Chernobyl in 1986—the United States came quite close to disaster at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979. Past and possible future accidents aside, the United States, Russia, China, and other countries are producing deadly nuclear and chemical wastes without any means of storing them safely for the thousands of years that they remain highly dangerous to the health of humans and other beings.

From their ecological point of view, the Greens see little difference between communism and capitalism. The ideologies by means of which both systems justify themselves are essentially heedless of the natural environment upon which we and all creatures ultimately rely. Therefore, say the Greens, we need to rethink the assumptions on which these influential ideologies are founded in the first place. More than that, we need to devise an ideology that recognizes and respects nature's delicate system of checks and balances.

TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL ETHIC

Many Greens prefer not to call their perspective an ideology but an "ethic." Earlier ecological thinkers, such as Aldo Leopold, spoke of a **land ethic**.⁹ Others have spoken, more recently, of an ethic with earth itself at its center,¹⁰ while others, in a similar spirit, speak of an emerging "planetary ethic."¹¹ More often, however, Greens embrace an ethic they call **ecocentrism** (ecosystem-centered) or **biocentrism** (life-centered).

An ecocentric or biocentric ethic, Greens say, would emphasize the web of interconnections and mutual dependence within which we and other species live. People are not only connected with one another but with other species of animals and plants. The latter include not only those that human beings eat—fish, cows, and corn, for example—but the tiny plankton on which whales and ocean fish feed, the insects and minnows eaten by lake and river fish, the worms that loosen and aerate the soil in which the corn grows. The corn feeds the cows that fertilize the fields, and the humans eat the fish, the corn, and the cows. All are interdependent participants in the cycle of birth, life, death, decay, and rebirth. And all the participants in this cycle depend upon the air and water, the sunlight and soil, without which life is impossible.

These, the Greens say, are elemental truths that we forget at our peril. Yet forget them we have. In separating ourselves from nature, we have divided our lives and experiences into separate compartments. We think of vegetables and meats as commodities that come from the grocery store wrapped in plastic and styrofoam, for instance, and water as it comes from the faucet or bottle. We rarely pause to reflect upon what makes these things possible and available to us, or of how much we depend on them—and they on us. But this sense of disconnect-
edness, the Greens charge, is an illusion that, unless dispelled, will doom our species and many others to extinction.