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Greening Liberal Democracy: Practice, Theory and Political Economy¹

John Barry

Introduction: the green challenge for and to liberalism

It seems to be a more or less settled opinion that green politics is 'post-not anti-liberal': as Eckersley maintains, it is 'decidedly post-rather than anti-liberal' (Eckersley, 1992, p. 30), a theme shared in much recent green political theorizing (Doherty and de Geus, 1996; Stephens, 1996; Wissenburg, 1998; Barry, 1999b). At the same time, there are those who claim that there are resources within liberalism for addressing the normative and material aspects of problematic social-environmental interaction (Wissenburg, 1998; de-Shalit, 1997; Sagoff, 1988). Given this, and their endorsement of other liberal principles such as pluralism and tolerance, green democratic theory falls within the ambit of theories which seek the 'preservative transcendence' of liberalism (Berry, 1986) as opposed to its abolition. At least at the level of political theorizing, there is more of an engagement with ecological concerns and issues within mainstream political theory, including liberalism but not limited to it, than before. What appears to be happening is 'environmental' issues such as sustainability, sustainable development, pollution, human treatment of animals, the implications of environmental degradation and resource depletion for present and future generations, and a whole host of other questions are no longer the exclusive preserve (if they ever were) of a 'green' ideological perspective. Thus, the compatibility of liberalism with sustainability does not reduce to its compatibility with ostensibly 'green' political, economic or moral principles or goals.² In a sense having asked the questions, the green political and moral position now has to compete with others to provide answers. The question is how much sustainability can liberal democratic theory and practice deliver or, vice versa, how
much or what sorts of sustainability and ecological concern is compatible with liberal democracy?

It is also the case that the engagement of green political theory with liberalism is related to the 'maturing' of green discourse, as it shifts from 'critique' to proposing practicable and attractive alternatives. It is significant to note that this evolution of green politics also turns on the reorientation of its analysis. Firstly, this reorientation focuses on greens advancing an 'immanent critique' of modernity and liberal democratic societies as opposed to a 'utopian' critique. A key development here, significant for the present paper, is the attention paid to the principle of 'sustainability' (its definition and institutionalization), with consequently less attention to prescribing the contours of some future 'sustainable society'. This partly maps onto a defence of ecological sustainability in terms of the 'right' as opposed to the 'good' (though this also involves seeing sustainability as equally justifiable on both sorts of grounds). Secondly, there is a discernible move towards 'transformative' as opposed to 'radical/abolitionist' institutional change. Thirdly, there is a move away from the 'apocalyptic' rhetoric of a civilization-threatening (or species-threatening) 'ecological crisis' to a less alarmist sense that what human societies are facing is a series of interrelated resource and pollution problems in social-environmental relations with material, economic, social, political and moral dimensions (Barry, 1999b). These developments I suggest make a rapprochement between 'green' and 'liberal' political views possible, while also opening up the discussion of a liberal democratic approach to the challenge of ecological sustainability.

It is within this context, that the relationship between green politics, the challenge of ecological sustainability and the 'greening' of liberal democratic theory and practice takes place. Goodin aptly sums up these developments by arguing that, 'we can presumably live more or less in harmony with nature even in advanced industrial and post-industrial societies, without necessarily dropping out of those societies altogether', adding in footnote that 'the green political agenda would be even more pointless than its worst critics imagined were that not the case' (Goodin, 1992, p. 119). I take this 'realistic' position as the starting point for discussing the shape of liberal democratic sustainable societies.

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the theoretical and practical dimensions of the liberal response to the challenge of sustainability in general and the prospects for the 'greening of liberalism' in particular. It is divided into three parts. The following section looks at ecological modernization as a real-world example of the greening of liberalism, while the second section explores some of the theoretical resources within liberalism to green itself. The third section looks at some implications for liberal political economy of the greening of liberalism.

'Greening' liberal practice: ecological modernization

If socialism was 'organising liberalism' in Kautsky's words, then ecological modernization can be viewed as 'ecologizing liberalism', though the extent and character of this 'ecologization' is a moot point (Weale, 1992; Christoff, 1996; Mol, 1996; Barry, 1999b). The basic tenet of ecological modernization is that the zero-sum character of environment-economic trade-offs is more apparent than real. Ecological modernization challenges the idea that improvements in environmental quality or the protection of nature are necessarily inimical to improved economic performance, the fundamental position which dominated early political responses to the 'environmental crisis'. In this earlier debate the green position was that a steady-state economy, in conjunction with zero population growth, was the only economy-ecology relationship which could ensure long-term sustainability (Daly, 1973). In opposition to this idea, ecological modernization suggests that economic competitiveness is not incompatible with environmental protection; indeed, as Weale points out, 'environmental protection is a potential source for future growth' (1992, p. 76). Future economic prospects increasingly depend on achieving and maintaining high standards of environmental protection. Key to this is separating economic growth from rising ecological inputs, especially energy and material inputs (Dobson, 1995; Jacobs, 1996), thus improving the 'ecological efficiency' of production. At the same time, ecological modernization is viewed as enhancing rather than reducing the quality of life, and concerned with encouraging green consumption (as well as greener production), rather than calling for radical decreases in consumption.

In general terms then, ecological modernization can be viewed as an account of how existing political and economic institutions within liberal democracies have responded to public pressure for governments to 'do something' about environmental problems. Ecological modernization for Weale is understood both as a legitimating ideology within certain liberal societies' response to environmental problems, and as a new departure in environmental policy principles (1992, p. 79). As such it can be viewed as marking a new environmental policy discourse from...
within the existing institutions of the liberal state, a form of institutional learning. Its emergence and strength as an ideology lie mainly in its capacity to render the imperative for economic growth compatible with the imperative to protect environmental quality (perfectly in keeping with the ‘supply side’ preference of liberal democracy, i.e. having one’s cake and eating it, without requiring large-scale redistributive policies, or radical socio-economic change).

Ecological modernization, particularly when placed within the context of a ‘green welfare’ or ‘green social democracy’, may, like the emergence of the welfare state before it, be construed as an attempt to politically regulate production (though not necessarily by central state planning and regulation), in response to the socialization of the (environmental) costs of production as a result of ‘market failure’. For example, ‘polluter-pays’ legislation, the precautionary principle, mandatory environmental impact assessments, etc., all of which are central to ecological modernization, can be regarded as ways in which the environmental costs of production are either prevented or ‘internalized’ to some extent. In this way, ecological modernization can be viewed as an ecological dimension to the modern liberal state’s ‘crisis management’ function. In short, ecological modernization is, in large part, a political programme for the state to ‘manage’, ‘steer’ or ‘shape’ (but not fundamentally challenge or seek to reverse, hence its ‘realism’ or ‘pragmatism’) the economic dynamics and trends of an increasingly globalized capitalist economic system on which it depends yet cannot fully control (Jacobs, 1999a; Barry, 1999c; Dryzek, 1996).

**Economic-ecological planning, regulation and ecological modernization**

The attraction and necessity of planning and coordination can be seen as partly to do with the search for integrated policy approaches to dealing with environmental problems (Wheele, 1992, pp. 93-118). Following Dryzek, the problem is that a purely political or economic ‘solution’ to an environmental problem more often than not simply displaces it rather than solves it (1987, pp. 10-11). Displacement can cross media (water pollution to solid waste pollution), space (exporting pollution), time (future generations) or from one nation to another (externalities from the economy being passed to the political sphere) or within an institution (from one department to another). There is thus a gap between these ‘solutions’ to ecological problems and ecological solutions. Thus while it may be economically or politically rational, in the short term, to pollute the environment in excess of its ability to assimilate that level of pollution, it is clearly not ecologically rational in terms of the environment’s capacity to sustain non-decreasing levels of human (and non-human) welfare or well-being.

Planning for sustainability can be thought of as analogous to decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Sustainability planning in this context is more about the avoidance of undesirable (unsustainable) outcomes, than the achievement of any particular outcome. Given the uncertainty which characterizes environmental problems, any environmental planning will necessarily have to be flexible, sensitive to ecological feedback and not cause irreversible ecological changes. To use Beck’s (1992a) terminology, what is required is a ‘reflective’ and flexible form of collective regulation understood as a social learning process as well as an exercise in social-ecological adaptation. For Weale the planning aspect of ecological modernization begins with the recognition that, ‘if national planning is shunned, its alternative will have to be invented’ (Weale, 1992, p. 149). At the same time, clear, public planning and regulation can encourage and improve environmental innovation, often more effectively than reliance on ‘voluntary’ or market mechanisms (Ashford, 1993).

An important feature of ecological modernization is its attitude to the ‘free market’. Although a self-regulating market economy can deliver an optimum allocation of resources within the economy (from the point of view of orthodox economic efficiency), it is unlikely to result in an optimum scale of the economy relative to its environment. According to Daly and Cobb, ‘Environmental degradation must be shown to result from the scale of the economy in general, rather than only from allocative mistakes that can be corrected while throughput continues to grow exponentially’ (1990, p. 368, emphasis added). An unregulated market may increase the scale of the economy beyond that which the environment can sustain. The problem with orthodox economic theory in this respect is that a Pareto-optimal allocation of resources does not say anything about the ecological sustainability of the scale of resource use. The need for political, state regulation of a market organized economy is, as Dryzek notes, because ‘markets are addicted to economic growth...market systems are unique in possessing an acute need for continuous growth’ (1987, p. 72). Here, there is a hiatus within ecological modernization between offering a more ecologically sustainable form of economic growth, or whether it constitutes an alternative to orthodox economic growth. However, the important point to note is that the regulation, planning and other forms of state intervention envisaged in the ecological modernization model relate first and foremost to
the scale of the metabolism between the human economy and the ecological processes and inputs upon which it depends. That is, it is concerned with the macro-level management of the economy-ecology metabolism, not micro-level economic activity per se.

The planning element of ecological modernization can be understood negatively. According to Meadowcroft 'planning for sustainable development' could be understood as 'the planned adjustment of social practices and institutions in order to ensure avoidance of unsustainable social trajectories'... or [it] might be defined as 'a conscious process of social choice to select and realize a preferred, and sustainable, development trajectory' (1997, p. 171, emphasis in original). In some ways, a defensive view of sustainability (avoidance of unsustainable forms of social development) is in keeping with the interpretation of ecological modernization as the extension of the 'crisis management' function of the liberal state to ecological problems. It also seems to fit with ecological modernization as linked to the aim of achieving 'weak' as opposed to 'strong' sustainability (Pearce et al., 1989), in which a central political aim is to find more ecologically sustainable means to more or less existing ends. That is, the 'reformist' character of ecological modernization is, in part, tied to its principal concern with securing the ecological-economic means to given ends, as opposed to regarding the interrogation of the various ends that these means are used to realize as a necessary part of the search for ecological sustainability. In practice the liberal democratic approach to ecological sustainability (understood as 'sustainable development') simply sees 'development' as something 'given' (where development is often closely identified as 'progress', 'globalization' or the like) while attention is given to how best to find more ecologically sustainable means of fulfilling that 'given' development path. As Meadowcroft points out in his discussion of national sustainable development plans:

The essential focus of these national sustainable development plans is the environment and environmental sustainability. 'Development' is considered an ongoing and largely exogenously determined process, which may to some degree be steered, but whose environmental consequences must in any case be managed. (1997, p. 180, emphasis added)

Raising the issue of the 'development' side of sustainable development is closer to the ideas of Beck (1992a) and radical greens who suggest that development and progress need to be viewed as endogenous variables rather than as exogenously given. Beck, for example, suggests that ecological sustainability requires the reconceptualization of 'progress' such that the democratic (or self-reflexive) determination of what counts as 'social progress' or 'development' is itself viewed as a constitutive aspect of a more ecologically rational form of social progress or development. In a sense, what Beck is suggesting is that sustainable development requires a collective, democratic reflection on what type of society we are to be, rather than simply questioning the economic-ecological means by which the present social order and its underlying dynamics is sustained. Beck seems to be saying that what needs to be done is for 'society' to ask itself not 'what should we do?', but rather 'what sort of society do we want to live in?'. However, it is plain that such a radical proposal, which at root expresses the claim that the ecological problems of (liberal) democracy can be solved by more democracy, with the aim of collectively and consciously choosing to redesign and restructure liberal democratic societies, is not a realistic option in the present political climate.

It is perhaps more practically useful to view ecological sustainability defensively or negatively: that is, to attempt to rule out particular sorts of development or modernization paths rather than prescriptively determine one particular sustainable development path. The point is that there is no one development path for society that is sustainable, and thus no determinate set of social, economic or political institutions which constitute 'the sustainable society' contain the ideological claims of ecologism. Neither science nor metaphysics can authoritatively determine one particular sustainable development path or how best to institutionalize it, and thus it is a matter of political judgement rather than expert knowledge or religious/spiritual revelation as to what ecological sustainability means. As such, this negative interpretation of 'ecological sustainability' is in keeping with liberal scepticism regarding the liberty-threatening potentials of determinate, prescriptive accounts of social change.

However, it would be a mistake to see ecological modernization in purely institutional or technical terms. For some, ecological modernization can also be seen as a form of 'green welfare republicanism' in the sense that it demands a 'virtue-based' conception of citizenship, a reconceptualization of the relationships between state, civil society and individuals as citizens and consumers, one in which citizen duties are as important as citizen rights in the collective aim of achieving and maintaining sustainability (Weale, 1992, pp. 150–1).

Thus, on the one hand, ecological modernization is viewed by critics as a bureaucratic 'crisis management' approach by the liberal state to
costly ecological externalities which will not deliver sustainability because it does not deal with the root cause of ecological degradation, namely economic growth. On the other hand, others suggest that ecological modernization marks a positive new development in liberal democracy, one which seeks to pursue sustainability goals without the (green) ideological and negative baggage of associating those goals with diminished aspirations for material advancement, consumption and modern lifestyles, and radical social and cultural transformation. A central part of this is the emergence of ‘social liberal’ themes within a green social democratic framework, and an emphasis on firmly linking the environmental agenda as congruent with, and indeed a constitutive part of, ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization’.

However, at the end of the day, whether ecological modernization succeeds in combining sustainability and economic growth is an empirical question. Its promise of combining continued economic modernization, growth, consumption and so on with improved environmental protection is an attractive one to states, supra-state institutions such as the EU and to the overwhelming majority of citizens in liberal democracies.

### Greening liberal theory

Theoretically the ‘greening’ of liberal democracy requires that one distinguishes between ‘classical’ or economic liberalism and ‘social liberal’ traditions, as suggested by de- Shalit (1997). If one is interested in developing a ‘green liberalism’, or more minimally in ‘greening liberalism’, one has to distinguish between the social liberalism of J. S. Mill and others and the ‘classical liberalism’ associated with libertarianism and forms of liberalism which are intrinsically, as opposed to contingently or instrumentally, tied to capitalism (such as ‘neoliberalism’). de- Shalit divides the liberal tradition between

mainstream American liberalism ... based on the values of neutrality, minimal state intervention, an opposition to regulations, and a concept of politics as an aggregate of autonomous decisions - all of which are antithetical to environmental policies. The other interpretation, sometimes called ‘social liberalism’, is not hostile to advancing certain ideas of the good (for example, conservation) and is more open to state intervention. (1997, p. 88)

In agreement with him, I suggest that the greening or ecologizing of liberalism requires that the liberalism in question be of the ‘social’ rather than the ‘classical/libertarian’ kind. In particular, the shape of liberal democratic sustainable societies will, I suggest, be determined, in large part, on whether and how the political and social regulation of the economy (particularly the global economy) is achieved and institutionalized for ecological and social purposes. At root this requires the separation of political institutions and values of liberal democracy from the capitalist, market-based organization of the economy within a liberal society. This separation is, I argue, a necessary condition for sustainable liberal democratic societies.

However, in keeping with many others in this volume (Wissenburg, Hayward, Achterberg, de Geus), there are resources and themes within the liberal tradition which render it compatible with ecological concerns in general, and indeed some specifically green ones in particular.

### The precautionary principle, risk and harm: neutrality and the ‘greening’ of liberalism

In liberal theory the operation of the ‘harm principle’ is closely related to the principle of liberal neutrality, as offering a justification of state intervention in the ‘private sphere’. It is intimately related both to the recognition of ‘harm’ (to the individual him or herself and others, and can be extended to include future generations), and the overarching principle of state neutrality and impartiality with regard to views of the good and protecting the negative liberty of the individual. It is important to note that sustainability, as outlined earlier, operates at the macro-level of the economy, though of course this will have effects at the individual level. However, the application of the harm principle is tied with the question of establishing the existence of harm which in turn is related to verifying the cause of the harm.

Even if the ‘ecological ‘doom and gloom’ projections about ecological catastrophe are misleading, but the costs of not adopting a ‘strong’ view of sustainability are potentially great, then it is not unreasonable to act on imperfect information. Indeed, one could say that given our lack of knowledge about economic-ecological interactions, the precautionary principle approximates a real-world Rawlsian ‘veil of ignorance’. The reality is that the effects (particularly long term) of large-scale human interventions in natural processes are associated with high degrees of unpredictability and probability (Faber et al., 1992). Indeed, it is important to note that one of the main sources of knowledge and information on the effects of human activity on natural processes, ecological science, is explanatory rather than predictive.

The precautionary principle has come to be seen as an appropriate principle governing environmental policy-making under conditions of
uncertainty and against a background of heightened public sensitivity to ‘risk’ (Beck, 1992a). According to O’Riordan and Jordan, ‘At the core of the precautionary principle is the intuitively simple idea that decision makers should act in advance of scientific certainty to protect the environment (and with it the well-being interests of future generations) from incurring harm’ (1995, p. 194). Hence there is a direct link between liberalism and environmental concerns on the basis of the ‘harm principle’. The precautionary principle (like the harm principle, from which it is derived) can be used to justify legitimate state intervention in ostensibly ‘private’ matters, though it is important to note that more often than not, ‘private’ means corporate economic activity rather than the individual citizen’s privacy per se.

Coglianese (1998) offers a recent example of the relationship between liberal neutrality and environmental policy, and in particular the liberal fear of partiality and excessive state interference in the lives of individual citizens as a result of environmental regulation. His starting point is that:

> Environmental policies can and sometimes do affect important aspects of life in ways that constrain individuals’ ability to pursue their own plans for a meaningful life. Environmental regulations not only affect the prices of products that individuals may purchase, but can also restrict the types of foods, drinks, medicines and other goods that individuals may enjoy. They can restrain individual uses of private property. (1998, p. 42)

It is interesting to note how the liberty and well-being enhancing effects of environmental policy-making are not considered, nor is there a recognition that the ‘private sphere’ interfered with does not so much relate to the ‘private individual’ or citizen, but the ‘private sphere’ of the macroeconomy and the operation of economic actors, industrial sectors, corporations and so on. But then Coglianese fits the ‘American liberal’ profile, outlined by de-Shalt above, more concerned with establishing the liberty-harming effects of state intervention (particularly in the economy) than anything else. However, despite this ideological handicap, he does manage to raise some interesting points regarding the relationship between liberal neutrality and state environmental policy-making and regulation.

His argument is that ‘a commitment to neutrality requires environmental policy to aim toward the maintenance of the varied resources needed to support diversity in individual lives... neutrality that ultimately environmental policy respect individuals and preserve a multiplicity of resource uses’ (1998, p. 43). In common with many other libertarians, he is committed to a generally techno-optimistic outlook, a belief in orthodox science and technology (often used as a ‘supply side’ strategy to circumvent considerations of intergenerational justice (Barry, 1999b)) and stresses the central importance of establishing causality in discussing the application of the ‘harm’ principle. As he states, ‘The degree of uncertainty over environmental harms suggests that in some cases the harm principle may be only minimally to weakly satisfied’ (1998, p. 49). According to this logic, one has to firmly establish the causal relationship between ‘environmental degradation’ and ‘human harm’ before the neutrality of the state can be squared with legitimate state intervention. The presumption of having to ‘prove harm’ over ‘disproving harm’/‘proving harmlessness’ is one that greens have found problematic, not least because it appears arbitrary to demand the former over the latter.

The precautionary principle offers a challenge to Coglianese’s conceptualization of liberal neutrality and environmental regulation, particularly with regard to establishing ‘harm’ in some legalistic sense of ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. The precautionary principle picks up on this idea of ‘reasonable doubt’ and builds upon it within the context of conditions of uncertainty. As O’Riordan and Jordan put it:

> Precaution challenges the established scientific method; it tests the application of cost-benefit analysis in those areas where it is undoubtedly weakest (i.e. situations where environmental damage may be irreversible or potentially catastrophic), it calls for changes to established legal principles and practices such as liability, compensation and burden of proof. (1995, p. 193)

According to Coglianese, ‘a multiple-use management approach appears to be a paradigm of a liberally neutral environmental policy’ (1998, p. 51). Multiple-use might be viewed as the preferred outcome from a liberal neutrality position as opposed to an a priori or principled disposition either for or against the ‘development’ or ‘preservation’ of the environment. As it stands it is not difficult to see why such a principle would appeal to liberal environmental governance, since it seeks to ensure a plurality of uses for environmental resources (and associated views of the good), rather than stipulating one particular use (or non-use). Much like the ecological modernization model, a state policy of multiple use seeks to have as many goods as possible (the fruits of economic growth, development and environmental quality and protection),
or rather not to unnecessarily privilege or favour some views of the good over others. But of course, this 'multiple use' principle of liberal environmental management will not work in all cases, particularly in cases of irreversible environmental change and large-scale developments with correspondingly large-scale environmental degradation, and in cases where the possible environmental risks or costs are serious. With regard to normative disagreements, which are common in environmental politics, a multiple-use approach will not work in cases where the fundamental moral issue is between whether a 'natural resource' is used or not (or indeed, moral conflict over whether to view and value some natural entity or process as a 'resource' in the first place), rather than about the manner in which it is to be used.

However, the application of the precautionary principle does challenge liberal neutrality qua 'multiple use' in that whether or not the state decides on one form of environmental regulation over another (or whether it decides to regulate at all) is not based on a 'presumption' of the 'environmental innocence' of all forms of environment-changing development. In this respect the precautionary principle represents a potentially strong principle of environmental protection in which the tables are turned such that orthodox 'development' interests have to disprove environmental damage rather than 'environmental' interests having to prove ecological harm. In some, though not all, cases of conflict between 'development' and 'environmental' interests, the state cannot be neutral, or rather the precautionary principle acts to qualify its prima facie impartiality/neutrality in the public interest in immediate avoidance of 'ecological harm', or where it bases its decision on some idea of the 'common interest' (or considerations of intergenerational justice, and the avoidance of future harm). The precautionary principle may thus operate as a decision-making principle that is compatible with a concern for intergenerational justice, particularly where 'critical natural capital' is concerned, to use Pearce's terminology (1989), that is forms of 'natural capital' that cannot be replaced, substituted or compensated for by an equivalent amount of 'human capital'. Decision-making regarding 'non-critical natural capital' seems to be the most appropriate aspect of environmental decision-making for a multiple-use approach.

A liberal interpretation of the precautionary principle seems to move in the direction of rejecting any a priori disposition for or against development or preservation, by (being typically liberal and) opting for both in the form of insisting on 'multiple use' of the particular environmental resource or conflict in question. At root, the 'multiple use' principle of liberal environmental management assumes that such a compromise is socially sustainable in the sense that the different groups and views of the good associated with the different uses can tolerate one another and accept the 'compromises' and the 'give and take' required by the decision-making process — that is have a common respect for the liberal political institutional structure of society and its procedures for conflict resolution in environmental matters.

The precautionary principle seems to fit the 'negative' or defensive logic of liberalism (which is related to the neutrality demand), since the principle is about ruling out certain forms of decisions and environmental uses, not the stipulation of a particular set. It also has the intuitively and popular appeal of being 'commonsensical', and thus might form an important function in providing democratic legitimacy for environmental decision-making by public authorities. It can also be seen as a collective-denying ordinance, for long-term collective interest. It is particularly suited to decision-making under conditions of incomplete, imperfect or conflicting information or knowledge. On this view, the precautionary principle can be seen as a modern, collective version of the virtue of prudence, acting as a 'coping mechanism' for dealing with the dynamic, ever-changing and unpredictable relationship between human societies and their ecological bases (hence why it is central to any process of institutional ecological 'self-reflexivity' such as Beck's (1992a)). This principle expresses in a modern legal form the virtue of prudence in respect to human uses (and abuses) of the environment. It strengthens the case for environmental preservation and the regulation of economic-ecological interaction. The precautionary principle and the role of the state in implementing it, typically within the context of environment versus development disputes, stress the need for discrimination and careful consideration when faced with development proposals. Thus the precautionary principle is not anti-development per se, nor is it pro-preservation, since development is always possible so long as it does not violate ecological sustainability. However, the main point here is that effective and prudent ecological management requires such ex ante policy principles, like the precautionary one, an aim of which is to possibly prevent environmental problems from arising in the first place, as opposed to exclusively ex post, compensatory ones.

The integration of the precautionary principle within liberal theory and practice offers a way in which a note of humility can be introduced into the relationship between human societies and their ecological systems. It tempers the ecological vice of human 'arrogance' or 'hubris' vis-à-vis nature, without rejecting anthropocentrism. Above all
the precautionary principle recognizes that 'limits to knowledge' are just as important as 'limits to growth' in analysing social-environmental interaction, and developing appropriate principles (and institutions) to cope with the difficulties, changes and problems associated with that interaction.

From private property to ecological stewardship?

The case of land ownership

The harm principle, extended to non-human entities or to future generations, may be used not only to justify state regulation or intervention of ostensibly ‘private’ activities on liberal grounds, but also as a possible justification for redefining and reconceptualizing the notion of private property in land and in relation to ecological processes. The harm principle may be used to push liberalism in a more radical direction than ecological modernization. At the same time this is obviously another aspect of the ‘dismembering’ of political liberalism from ‘economic liberalism’ or unfettered, self-regulating market organization of production, distribution and consumption. One of the key relations of a self-regulating market economy, together with prices allocating resources and market outcomes determining the scale of the economy relative to its ecological base, is private property. In liberal economic theory it is on grounds of economic efficiency (viewed in terms of productivity and economic growth) that private property is favoured and promoted. Private property has also been a central part of liberal political theory, usually on the grounds that it offers the individual property-owner a sphere protected from state interference, promoting individual responsibility, autonomy and self-determination. However, as Wissenburg (1998) points out, even within liberal democracy, private property is viewed as absolute or beyond public, political regulation. In this section, I wish to explore the notion of private property from an environmental perspective in respect to land ownership.

In environmental debate it is land as private property that often has been at the forefront of the theoretical and real-world conflicts between market and non-market approaches to environmental issues. On the one hand there is the ‘free market environmentalist’ position in which the standard solution to environmental problems is the privatization of land and other ecological resources where environmental quality and sustainability are determined by market considerations in which the land-owner’s self-interest is central to how the land is used and treated (Anderson and Leal, 1991). On the other hand there are non-market strategies which either tend towards state regulation and/or ownership of the land (Jacobs, 1995) or those which propose some version of a ‘commons regime’ approach to land ownership and use (Ecologist, 1992).

From the point of view of environmental sustainability understood as a public good and premised on the ‘harm principle’, there is evidence of a redefinition of private ownership of the land within liberal democratic practice. In particular, one can see in the growth in state regulation of land use a shift away from a conception of the land as private property towards a notion of the land as common property, or at least not as the exclusive private property of the legal owner. As Varner puts it: ‘As environmental laws and regulations proliferate, we increasingly treat land as a public resource owned in common and held by individuals only in a stewardship (or trust) capacity’ (1994, p. 143). This idea of land/ecological stewardship is, I suggest, a central aspect of ecological sustainability, both normatively and practically, and can be understood in two related senses.

On the one hand is the view of stewardship as indicating a relation to the land in terms other than private ownership, where the land is viewed as the exclusive property of an individual and which he or she (or it) has the right to dispose of as they see fit. The idea of stewardship here concerns its ‘other-relatedness’ in the sense that decisions about how this ‘property’ is to be viewed, used and treated extend beyond the self-interest of a private owner and towards the set of interests affected in the particular practice of stewardship in question.

On the other hand, stewardship captures the future-orientated character of ecological sustainability, the view of stewardship as a particular relation to the land in which maintaining and improving long-term productive human-nature interaction is central. From an ecological perspective this notion of land ownership and use has been displaced by a narrow economic view of the land as a private property resource in which considerations of long-term sustainability often have little part to play in land management decisions. Increasingly the need to take a less narrow economic view of the land (qua economic resource) and regard it from a wider ecological context has been proposed as a necessary part of ecological sustainability. It is on this point that we can see the ‘greening’ of liberal democratic environmental policy, following the spirit, if not the letter, of Aldo Leopold’s famous ‘Land Ethic’. According to him:

The ‘key-log’ which must be moved to release the evolutionary process of an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land-use
as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. It of course goes without saying that economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done for land. It always has and it always will. (Leopold, 1968, p. 224, emphasis added)

Unfortunately, it is the sentences between the italicized sections that have received the most attention in most discussions of Leopold. However, a less narrow assessment of Leopold's 'Land Ethic' seems to fit with the 'multiple use' principle of liberal environmental policy and management. The important point to note is that, contrary to many ideological green interpretations (particularly deep ecology and ecocentrism), Leopold's land ethic does not underwrite a 'hands-off' relation between humans and the land and a rejection of human (economic) interests in favour of ecocentric ones. Rather the 'Land Ethic' recognizes that a less short-sighted (i.e., more sustainable) relation to the land requires the integration of human and economic considerations within a social-ecological context of intentional, productive relations between particular humans and particular environments. Ecological stewardship does not necessarily require the rejection of human economic-productive uses of the land, and ecocentrists are not the only possible stewards of the land.

An anthropocentric ecological management position is something that I think is evident in the redefinition of land ownership as private property as a result of the liberal democratic state's response to environmental problems and interests. Partly as a result of the socialization (externalization) of the ecological costs of particular forms of land use and management, increased state regulation of the land recognizes the fact that land use has an ecological dimension in which the effects of particular local land uses can have wider, ecological effects which go beyond the individual land-owner. In short, an ecological conception of 'harm' highlights the fact that 'private', unregulated use of ecological resources can result, more often than not, in ecological harm. Varner sums up this ecological challenge to the notion of private land ownership. According to him:

Increasingly, taking an ecological view of land forces us to treat it as a public resource that individuals hold only in stewardship (or trust) capacity. Any and every piece of land is involved in diverse ecological processes, and any and every form of land use affects those processes to some extent... My conclusion is that the eclipse of land as private property is near at hand... In this age of ecological literacy we have discovered that land uses depend so heavily on ecological infrastructure—on processes that, if they are property at all, are inherently public property—that it hardly makes sense to conceive of land as private property. (Varner, 1994, p. 158)

The important point here from a liberal position is to note how much mileage the standard 'harm principal', when placed in an ecological context, can underwrite proactive state intervention (such as the ecological modernization model), justified on the grounds of the land (and wider ecological processes upon which it depends and contributes) as common property rather than private property. The idea of the land (and wider ecological systems) as common property also highlights the way in which these social-ecological relations create webs of interdependence between humans (and non-humans), so that individual, private decisions in ecological matters have such wider collective effects that they cannot be considered as 'private' and therefore immune from public, political or state regulation. Indeed, this point can be taken further by showing how individual consumption decisions have public and ecological ramifications, and part of the shift towards sustainability involves being aware of and responsible for those consumption decisions. The separation of ownership and use seems to be a clear implication of an ecological view of how to sustainably manage the land, in which 'private' ownership and use is subsequent to and 'nested within' the collective interest of avoiding or minimizing 'ecological harm'.

Greening liberal political economy

My starting point here is that the western liberal position has been premised on a pro-economic growth perspective from Locke to Rawls. Given that ecological sustainability within liberal democracies would result in some drop in 'economic growth' and production as conventionally understood, is a non-growth orientated liberalism possible or desirable? This is particularly important for the liberal theory of social justice in which, from Adam Smith's adage that 'A rising tide raises all boats' to Rawls's difference principle, a key aspect of liberal social justice hinges on ensuring a growing economy and rising levels of material affluence and wealth. For Tocqueville, economic growth was a
necessary and not just a desirable feature of (liberal) democracy. According to him:

General prosperity is favourable to the stability of all governments, but more particularly of a democratic one, which depends upon the will of the majority, and especially upon the will of that portion of the community which is most exposed to want. *When the people rule, they must be rendered happy or they will overturn the state: and misery stimulates them to those excesses to which ambition raises kings.*

(Tocqueville, 1956, pp. 129-30, emphasis added)

If prosperity is essential to the stability of liberal democracy (which is what Tocqueville was discussing) the corollary of this is that a lack of prosperity would lead to instability and perhaps undermine the democratic political order. This argument was used by ‘eco-authoritarians’ to justify non-democratic, authoritarian government as the only political solution to the ‘ecological crisis’, viewed as a return to scarcity on account of ‘limits to growth’.

While not doubting the social disruption and problems that a drop in material standards of living may bring, social order need not be threatened by this so long as the costs are shared equitably throughout the whole society. Thus there is an intrinsic connection between arguments for ecological sustainability and social or distributive justice. Indeed politically speaking this is likely to be the most important part of any transition to a more sustainable society. In all likelihood it is only if some members of society are forced to accept lower material standards relative to others that severe social disharmony will emerge.

A more contentious question to ask here is whether the general liberal predisposition in favour of ‘development’ over ‘environmental preservation’ is based on some particular liberal idea of ‘progress’, some foundational commitment to multiplying choices and possible views of the good available to individuals. Is liberalism suspicious of environmental issues and claims on the grounds that they are perceived as limiting choices and views of the good life (regardless, *ceteris paribus*, of their ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘worthiness’)? On this basis, one may be in a better position to understand the liberal commitment to ‘development’, economic growth, modernization and so on (both historically and today) as rooted in the capacity of this model of ‘development’ to deliver more choices and multiply views of the good than the environmentalist alternative (which is often associated with a return to some pre-liberal/pre-Enlightenment/pre-industrial social order). That is, the connection between liberal democracy and capitalist economic organization orientated towards a particular industrial model of ‘development’ may have a normative justification based on the greater possible and actual plurality of views of the good associated with this model as opposed to others.

A less radical position than the ‘no-growth’ scenario associated with the ‘eco-authoritarians’ and Daly’s (1973) ‘steady-state economy’ perspective, is Jacobs’s (1996) proposals concerning altering the environmental impact and pattern of goods and services produced, and their mode of consumption. Jacobs (1996) suggests a shift from ‘economic growth’, understood as year-on-year increases in personal disposal income and consumption levels, to an emphasis on public investment and public goods as contributing to well-being. According to him:

*A more sustainable economy would have higher investment; it is unlikely to have higher private consumption. Where additional consumption is required it will often have to in the public sector, on goods such as public transport, environmental protection, healthcare and education... sustainability probably does mean that the era of taken-for-granted exponential consumption growth is at an end.*

(Jacobs, 1996, pp. 33-5, emphasis added)

Once again, one is struck by how much this seems to move us towards a ‘socialization of consumption’ to match the socialization of production (qua state regulation of private enterprises) under an ecologically modernizing liberal state. Such a reorientation of production and consumption also echoes Mill’s positive endorsement of the ‘stationary state’ in his *Principles of Political Economy*. Of course, such a strategy of regulating production and consumption towards public investment, without necessarily being opposed to the production and consumption of marketable private goods and services and a less unequal distribution of the latter, would push liberal democracy still further from a purely capitalist organization of the economy (though not necessarily towards a non-market, state-planned economy). It is also important to note that a shift towards public forms of consumption does not imply the abolition of private consumption. Theoretically as well as empirically, having some reasonable level of private consumption seems to be a necessary condition for the appropriate use and enjoyment of public goods.

According to Ernest Gellner, echoing Tocqueville’s statement above, ‘Liberty has ridden to victory on the back of consumerism... But it would be folly to be confident that all this must necessarily continue.
There are dangers ahead for affluence-sustained liberty' (1995, p. 29). But how true is this, and to what extent is 'liberty' necessarily 'affluence-sustained'? The challenge for liberal theory (and practice) depends on whether the transition to ecological sustainability will necessarily result in liberty-threatening decreases in individual levels of material affluence, or whether it will require some change in overall material affluence and a change in the overall pattern of how material affluence is produced, distributed and consumed. Does a decline in mass consumption necessarily threaten liberty? What liberties are ecologically unsustainable? Or what liberties are threatened in the emergence of a liberal welfare state less orientated towards maintaining and supporting increasing individual consumption levels?²

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, a 'liberal' view of sustainability is necessarily a 'negative' or defensive one, such that it is conceived as avoiding unsustainable development or modernization paths rather than prescribing a particular development path.

As far as possible, a liberal approach to sustainability seeks 'win-win' strategies, avoiding the 'zero-sum' implications of sustainability by seeking to 'do more with less'. It tries, as in the ecological modernization model, to maintain (and perhaps extend) the range of views of the good (ends) through a state-managed process of 'greener production' (means). The aim of a liberal (as opposed to, say, a deep ecological or ecometric) approach to sustainability is not to opt for a priori protection of nature over its productive use by humans, but rather to 'keep in check the destructiveness that progress requires' (Soltan, 1995, p. 15), while also seeking views of progress which minimize the destruction of the natural world.

However, at some point the liberal state (and society) may have to move beyond the issue of how to 'manage' development or progress (aided by ecological management strategies such as the precautionary principle and an ecoligized notion of the 'harm principle') and directly address the normative content of progress and development itself as a necessary aspect of the transition away from ecological unsustainability. It may be that the issue of sustainability is not simply related to 'supply side' questions of limited amounts of ecological inputs (energy, materials and assimilate capacity), but also has to do with the more difficult political problem of 'excess demand', something which liberal democracies have seemed unable to address, except in extraordinary circumstances such as wartime. Lacking a strong sense of collective purpose, modern liberal democratic politics are in large part held together by a common commitment to economic growth, prosperity and mass consumption. If the transition to a more sustainable liberal democracy requires the political regulation of consumption as well as production, this does not mean the abandoning of liberal democracy, but it does seem to indicate the emergence of a more social democratic liberalism, a central part of which seems to be the separation of political liberalism from economic liberalism.

Notes

1. I would like to thank all the participants at the ECPR workshop, and Marcel Wissenburg in particular, for helpful comments on this chapter.
2. A similar argument, for the 'de-greening' of the environment as a policy subject, has recently been made by Jacobs in respect of the 'Third Way' of the British 'New' Labour Party (1999a, pp. 4-13).
3. However, it is not the case that private property rights are necessarily suspect from an ecological point of view, though an ecological view of private property does require a less exclusive view of private property and a more conditional view of property as a 'right of access or use' as opposed to an exclusive right to use and dispose of property as the owner sees fit. Sometimes assigning property rights in this way can deliver a more sustainable use of a particular resource. An example of this is Brubaker. Discussing property relations and environmental management regimes, Brubaker states that: 'A number of countries have assigned property rights to inland and ocean fisheries... Confident that their rights to fish are secure, fishermen need not waste money building bigger boats and equipping them with more advanced gear in a race to catch fish' (1995, p. 211, emphasis added). A result of this would be a more sustainable harvesting of the renewable fish stock, as opposed to the stock itself being 'mined' and overfished. Thus confidence that one can sustain a decant level of well-being can offset attempts to boost appropriation caused by economic insecurity as a result of competition within an 'open access' situation. However, this is not to say that a strategy of assigning individual property rights of use is the only possible or desirable approach to 'open access' resources. 'Commons regimes' can also deliver sustainable use.
4. According to Allison (1991), from a 'utilitarian-cum-liberal/libertarian' perspective, the 'real' basis of much of the green critique of modern society is not based on ecological considerations of sustainability, but rather on a moral, puritan disapproval of the dominant ways of life pursued. He ends his polemic against 'radical greens' with the view that 'Meat must go because it obviously means so much to people. So must motor cars and competitive sport... Such radicalism is the revenge of the unhappy. It is premised on a hatred of life and driven by malice. Uniquely, from a utilitarian standpoint, it deserves the name evil' (1991, p. 178, emphasis in original). While clearly an extremist position, this 'voice of reason' does perhaps express an exaggerated sense of the liberal suspicion of the motives and implications of green politics.
5. The normative underpinnings of ecological sustainability (even in its less radical guise as sustainable development) challenges this economic logic of liberalism by introducing the distinction between 'luxuries' and 'needs' (particularly with regard to obligations of intergenerational justice). As Hubbard notes, using an ecological version of the 'harm principle' in discussing the implications of the 'limits to growth' for Rawls's theory of justice, where significant risk of serious injury to ourselves and our heirs is part of the price of luxuries for the present generation, then the primary issue of distributive justice is the maximum a society and a person should have, not the minimum' (1978, p. 344). The upshot of this for liberalism is whether distribution according to needs (or at least the political regulation of the definition, production and consumption of 'luxuries') within the context of 'constrained' economic growth (as conventionally understood) is possible within the present capitalist organization of production, distribution and consumption. While a 'non-growth' or 'post-growth' political liberalism seems at least theoretically possible (though Tocqueville and Gellner would disagree), a 'post-growth' capitalism seems an oxymoron.

5

Democracy and Sustainability: Aspects of Efficiency, Legitimacy and Integration

Nicos Labaras

Introduction

Is sustainability a coherent and useful concept? Is it essentially a normative concept and, if so, is it compatible with the values of liberal democracy? Is it possible to develop an account of its dimensions by using the values of liberal democracy as a binding interpretative framework? What does this process involve and what are its implications for the values and institutions of the political system?

This chapter attempts to approach these questions through a critical discussion of the arguments developed by four influential approaches: free market environmentalism (Anderson and Leal, 1991), the constant capital approach (Pearce et al., 1989), ecological economics (Jacobs, 1991) and ecological modernization (Weale, 1992). Even though these approaches adopt conflicting interpretations of the political system's values and function and couple them with equally conflicting views on sustainability, they do share three characteristics that may facilitate our discussion. Firstly, they all accept the institutional-normative framework of liberal democracy as a binding one for their interpretations of sustainability. Next, even though they represent rival environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997), it may be argued that they all take part in the debate on sustainable development. In a broad sense, their arguments have been developed with reference to the dominance of this discourse. Finally, notwithstanding their conflicting views regarding the sustainable development discourse, they all seem to share in common a minimal conception of sustainability.

A consensus on a minimal conception of sustainability can be shown to exist if we abstract from particular dimensions of the concept of sustainable development. In the context of the approaches we examine,