38 Strategies for Green Change

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How do we start? By what imaginable transition can we move from here to a green future? Can the immense gap at least be narrowed, between the Green-thinking dreamers and the present reality?

(Schwarz and Schwarz 1987: 253)

Ecologism provides us with a critique of current patterns of production and consumption, and the Schwarzes' 'Green-thinking dreamers' referred to in the quotation above have painted pictures of the sustainable society that they would like us to inhabit. Two of the classic requirements of a functional definition of 'ideology' are thus far fulfilled by ecologism: it has a description (which is already an interpretation) of 'political reality', and it has a prescription for the future, which amounts to a description of the Good Life. In the light of the space between the former and the latter, the primary question addressed in this chapter is: What is ecologism's strategy for social change? The subsidiary question posed is: 'Will this strategy (or these strategies) do the job required of them?'

The first point to note about ecologism and social change is that very little serious thinking has been done about it. Boris Frankel has rightly observed that: 'one reads very little about how to get there from here' (1987: 227), and it is noticeable how many conversations about green politics very soon dry up when the issue of change is broached. Several reasons for the lack of material might be advanced.

In the first place there is the belief that the changes required are so far-reaching that nothing short of an environmental catastrophe could produce the political will needed to bring them about: 'it is quite "unrealistic" to believe that we shall choose simplicity and frugality except under ecological duress' (Daly 1977a: 170).

Second, amongst more optimistic observers there has been a tendency to believe that the delivery of the message of impending catastrophe would be enough to generate social change. After all, how could a humanity aware of the threat to its existence fail to act in its own best interests? This certainly seems to have been the line taken in the original Limits to Growth report: 'We believe that an unexpectedly large number of men and women of all ages and conditions will readily respond to the challenge and will be eager to discuss not if but how we can create this new future' (Meadows et al., 1974: 196). Contrary to its authors' expectations, however, the publication of their report has not of itself produced the changes for which they argue.

It is often the immaturity of the ideology that is held responsible for its not having got to grips

with the issue of social change: green thinkers have had their work cut out simply describing our environmental malaise and convincing us of their arguments. It follows, from this perspective, that the very newness of the ideology is the reason for its current lack of a strategy that might be productive in the light of the ends it proposes. Now that the foundations are more or less in place, it is held, the strategy will follow.

This argument would be more persuasive if ecologism really did have no strategy for social change. The point is, rather, that it does have various strategies, but there is a suspicion that they have been found wanting—it is not as though its strategies are correct and that they just need more time to work. Jonathan Porritt sets the agenda for this chapter:

Though the environmental movement has indeed been growing in strength over the past few years, so that its influence is now greater than it has been since the early 1970s, this has not brought about the kind of fundamental shift that one might have anticipated. (in Goldsmith and Hildyard 1986: 343)

Porritt goes on to argue that this is because the green movement has founded its project on reform of the system rather than its 'radical overhaul'. This might be true, but it simply pushes the problem back one space and the problem still remains. How is the radical overhaul to be brought about? It must be stressed, though, that 'radical overhaul' is what we are talking about in the context of ecologism. No one would dispute that significant improvements to the environment can be brought about by parliamentary party and pressure group activity—it would be a mistake to underestimate the achievements of groups like Friends of the Earth, brought about by high levels of commitment and undeniable expertise. Similarly, many governments are now (to a greater or lesser degree) committed to environmental policies. However, Porritt's concern at the lack of change is based on his desire for a 'fundamental shift' and it is this objective that provides the backdrop for this chapter.

The distinction around which I intend to organize the discussion is that between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political activity. There is evidently nothing particularly novel about this, although the very fact that this turns out to be the most fruitful way of approaching the issue is symptomatic of the general theme of ecologism and social change: that liberal democratic politics and the spaces in which it allows one to act constitute the parameters for the majority of ecological political action.

Action Through and Around the Legislature

Green movements in most countries are attached to recognizably green parties which seek election to national legislatures. Green movements in all countries that have one see it as at least part of their role to try to influence the legislative process, either while policy is being drawn up, while bills are being debated, or during their execution. The principal assumption behind both kinds of activity (broadly speaking, party political activity and pressure group activity) is that the liberal-democratic decision-making process and the economic structures with which it is engaged are sufficiently open to allow the green agenda to be fulfilled through them. It seems to
be accepted that even if a green party is not elected to government then sufficient pressure can be brought to bear on the incumbents to bring about a sustainable society:

The Government ... must intervene, using the full range of sticks and carrots at its disposal, to address the root causes of our current crisis, not the symptoms. Through legislation, direct regulation, changes in the taxation system, subsidies, grants, loans, efficiency standards, the Government has it in its power to effect the sort of transition I am talking about. (Porritt 1984: 133)

The great majority of green literature on the issue of strategies for political change is written in the same vein. Peter Bunyard and Fern Morgan-Greene's *The Green Alternative* (1987) is typical, and the following constitutes a representative sample of the advice given (my emphasis added in each case): ‘If we act immediately, through lobbying local councils and rallying support amongst the community, we may be able to save areas of beauty for ourselves and the rest of humanity’ (p. 1); ‘We should *lobby Parliament* and voice concern that our money, via taxes, is being used to perpetrate policies that are ultimately destructive’ (p. 30); ‘We must make our own voices heard through, for instance, *instructing our MPs*’ (p. 4); ‘Write to your MP’ (pp. 58, 89). It is important to understand that these are not isolated examples of the kind of strategy advanced by the green movement. On the contrary, at this level the movement’s prescriptions rely extremely heavily on operation within the liberal-democratic framework. The question is: ‘Is such reliance advisable given the radical political and social change that ecologism proposes?’

The first problem for any green party (in some countries, and certainly in Britain) is that of getting elected in the first place—by which I mean not necessarily being elected to government but garnering sufficient votes to gain even minimal representation in the legislature. In Britain, the first-past-the-post system, in which the candidate in a given constituency with the most number of votes takes the seat, militates notoriously against small parties. The results of such a system were most obviously on view in the 1989 European elections when the British Green Party gained 15 per cent of the popular vote and yet won no seats in the Strasbourg Parliament. It is extremely hard to imagine the British Parliament with even one green representative, let alone with sufficient members to be able to enter into coalition with one of the major parties. Of course, most members of the Green Party in Britain are aware of this, and the parliamentary candidates I have talked to are evidently serious about political power, but see their role principally in educative terms. The platform provided by elections is used to ‘get the message across’. Of course, not all countries make it so difficult for small parties to taste electoral success, and shortly I shall consider the situation where a green party does have representation in a national legislature.

In any case, a green party’s political problems clearly do not end with getting elected. It would be faced with confronting and overcoming the constraints imposed by powerful interests intent on preventing the radical political and social change that a radical green government would seek. Even at the level of relatively minor changes, opposition would most likely be intense. Werner Hülsberg, for example, discusses the notion of a green government taxing resource-intensive industries and observes that ‘the question of power is largely ignored in this approach’ (Hülsberg 1988: 182), and that ‘[i]t is] clear that attempt at structural reform
would be met with an investment strike and flight of capital (ibid. 183). The central question in this context is whether a sustainable society can be brought about through the use of existing state institutions.

It has been argued that from two points of view the answer would seem to be 'No'. In the first place, political institutions are not best seen as neutral instruments that can be used by just any operator to achieve just any political ends. Political institutions are always already tainted by precisely those strategies and practices that the green movement, in its radical pretensions, seeks to replace. An instance of this would be the way in which political institutions (in the Western world at least) have come to embody the principles of representative forms of democracy. These institutions represent the formal abandonment of notions of mass participation in political life; they are indeed 'designed' to preclude the possibility of massive regular participation.

The exclusive nature of these institutions, which is constitutive of them, makes it impossible for them to be used for inclusive ends. If they were to be inclusive, in the sense of participatory, then they would be something other than they are. On this reading, participatory politics demands the radical restructuring (if not the abolition) of present institutions rather than their use in the service of participation. Attempts to press them into such service will necessarily result in the progressive dilution of the original project. Jonathon Porritt has argued that 'the taking of power from below, by this process of self-empowerment, must be combined with the passing down of power from above' (1984: 167), or as the 1994 Green Party (GWMT) Manifesto puts it: 'Parliament's role in the first five years of a green government will be ... to devolve functions to more local bodies' (p. 44). It has been suggested that this is a Utopian strategy, not because greens are as likely to be corrupted by power as anyone else (although this is a respectable argument), but because the institutions Porritt proposes to use already have centralization built into them.

Second, we have to take into account Hülsberg's point that political change is a matter of political and economic power. Even if we assume a green party in government, we are still left with the problem of powerful sources of resistance in other institutions such as the bureaucracy, the financial centres and so on. The Die Grünen Sindelfingen programme of January 1983 expressed the hopeful belief that

the desire for a different kind of life and work will grip the majority, and that this majority will be strong enough to demonstrate clearly to the opposing minority the superiority of an economic system whose goal is not itself but ecological and social need. (Hülsberg 1988: 127)

Hülsberg himself cogently observes that, in this formulation, 'The question as to what would happen if the "opposing minority" could not be convinced is simply avoided' (ibid.).

The question is: How far can radical green politics be achieved through the parliamentary context if its 'structural imperatives' demand the progressive abandonment of the principles of such politics?

In 1985 Rudolf Bahro, the most famous 'fundamentalist' in Die Grünen, left the party. He argued that by then the party had 'no basic ecological position' because 'what people are trying to do ... is to save a party—no matter what kind of party, and no matter for what purpose. The main thing is for it to get re-elected to parliament in 1987' (1986: 210). Bahro is here articulating
the experience of a fundamentalist green who has seen the party colonized by the demands of the very system that it originally sought to overcome. His conclusion ran as follows:

At last I have understood that a party is a counterproductive tool, that the given political space is a trap into which life energy disappears, indeed, where it is rededicated to the spirit of death. This is not a general but a quite concrete type of despair. It is directed not at the original project which is today called ‘fundamental’, but at the party. I’ve finished with it now. (Bahro 1986: 211)

The problem that has informed this discussion of the possibility of bringing about green change through the parliamentary process centres on the difficulty of bringing about a decolonized society through structures that are already colonized—structures that are deeply (perhaps irremediably) implicated in the status quo that green politics seeks to shift. This is not a new problem: socialists have been debating the issue for over 150 years. I think it important to reiterate it in this context, though, because it points up the tension between the radical nature of the green project and the piecemeal strategy that has often been advanced to bring it about. Indeed, if one focused solely on the parliamentary strategy one could be forgiven for thinking that the green movement had no radical project beyond environmentalism at all, so far is this strategy removed from any radical pretensions. Raymond Williams has pointed out the dangers of the ‘practical surrender of the real agenda of issues to just that version of politics which the critique has shown to be defective and is offering to supersede’ (1986: 252–3). This is the point of the general critique of the parliamentary road to the sustainable society.

Most people in the green movement who argue for change through liberal-democratic political structures will also support other forms of action. The rest of this chapter will be taken up with discussing these other options, under the four headings of lifestyle, communities, direct action and class.

Lifestyle

The general principle behind both lifestyle and community strategies is that changes of consciousness and changes in behaviour are mutually reinforcing. Lifestyle change concerns changes in the patterns of individual behaviour in daily life. Typical examples of this would be: care with the things you buy, the things you say, where you invest your money, the way you treat people, the transport you use, and so on.

During the late 1980s there was a veritable explosion in the popularity of green lifestyle changes in Britain. Home ecology, among certain sections of the community at least, was all the rage. Retailers picked up and reinforced this trend and the major supermarket chains fell over themselves to stock their shelves with environmentally friendly goods. Products in green packets sold significantly better than similar products packaged in any other colour. In this context, green rapidly becomes the colour of capitalist energy and enterprise. From the point of view of lifestyle changes, the spaces for political action are in principle infinite—even the toilet is a potential locus for radical politics, for as John Seymour and Herbert Girardet inform us: ‘A quarter of all domestic water in most countries goes straight down the toilet. Every time somebody flushes the toilet about 20 litres of water are instantly changed from being pure to being
polluted' (Seymour and Girardot 1987: 27). They offer concise advice: 'If it's brown wash it down. If it's yellow let it mellow' (ibid.). I suppose that's one way to start a revolution. Although the recession has taken its toll on the green consumer somewhat, as people buy the cheapest rather than the greener washing-up liquid, green consumption still exists. If anything, its relative invisibility is due to its success rather than its failure—it is now so much a normal part of the product parade that we don't notice it as much as we used to.

The lifestyle strategy has been around for a long time in the green movement and it has spawned an enormous number of books and pamphlets on practical action to avert environmental decay. Back in 1973 Fritz Schumacher wrote, 'Everywhere people ask: 'What can I actually do?' the answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: we can, each of us, work to put our own inner house in order' (1973: 249-50). The theme is consistent: that personal transformation leads to altered behaviour, which in turn can be translated into sustainable community living: 'The only possible building blocks of a Greener future are individuals moving towards a Greener way of life themselves and joining together with others who are doing the same' (Bunyard and Morgan-Grenville 1987: 336).

The positive aspect of this strategy is that some individuals do indeed end up living sounder, more ecological lives. More bottles and newspapers are recycled, more lead-free petrol is bought, and less harmful detergents are washed down the plughole. The disadvantage, though, is that the world around goes on much as before, ungreened and unsustainable—certainly in terms of Porritt's desire for a 'radical overhaul', which I took as my rubric for this chapter. In the first place, one has the problem of persuading sufficient numbers of people to lead sustainable lives for it to make a difference to the integrity of the environment. It is evidently hard to predict just how far the message will spread, and how many people will act on it, but it seems unlikely that a massive number of individuals will experience the conversion that will lead to the necessary changes in their daily behaviour.

At the same time, many of the proposals for change of this sort ask us to alter our behaviour at particular points in our daily life and then allow us back on the unsustainable rampage. There is nothing inherently green, for example, in green consumerism, briefly referred to above. It is true that consumer pressure helped bring about a reduction in the use of CFCs in aerosol sprays. It is true that the Body Shop will supply you with exotic perfumes and shampoos in reusable bottles and that have not been tested on animals. It is true that we can help extend the life of tropical rainforests by resisting the temptation to buy mahogany toilet seats. None of these activities should be belittled as actions to help save the environment, and they are particularly important in that they show it is possible to do something. However, the consumer strategy is arguably counter-productive at a deeper level of green analysis.

First, it does nothing to confront the central green point that unlimited production and consumption—no matter how environmentally friendly—is impossible to sustain in a limited system. The problem here is not so much to get people to consume soundly but to get them—or at least those living in profligate societies—to consume less. The Body Shop strategy is a hymn to consumption: in their contribution to the Friends of the Earth Green Consumer Week leaflet (12-18 September 1988) they urge people to 'wield their purchasing power responsibly' rather
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g sounder, is bought, is that the n terms of In the first enable lives predict just likely that a necessary behaviour at age. There is re. It is true sprays. It is able bottles of tropical activities important is arguably en and con a limited them—or a hymn to Veek leaflet sibility' rather than to wield it less often. It is this that makes green consumerism environmental rather than radically green.

Second, it has been pointed out that 'there are masses of people who are disenfranchised from this exercise of power by virtue of not having the money to spend in the first place' (Green Line, no. 69, March 1985: 12). Third, parts of the green movement feel consumerism to be too grubby and materialistic a means to lead us reliably to the stated end of a society of 'voluntary simplicity'. This is the point behind Porritt and Winner's observation that 'A crude, consumer-driven culture prevails, in which the spirit is denied and the arts are rejected or reduced to a privileged enclave for the few' (Porritt and Winner 1985: 247) and, more generally, that 'it is . . . worth stressing that the underlying aim of this green consumerism is to reform rather than fundamentally restructure our patterns of consumption' (ibid. 199). Once more we are forced to recognize the difference between environmentalism and ecologism: the strategy of green consumerism, in its call for change substantially in line with present strategies based on unlimited production and consumption, is a child of the former rather than the latter.

The strategy of change in individual habits leading to long-term social change takes no account, either, of the problem of political power and resistance to which I referred in the previous section. It is perhaps unrealistic to assume that those forces that would be positively hostile to sustainability will allow present forms of production and consumption to wither away. Of course, this is much less of a problem if the green movement has in mind only some form of attenuated environmentalism, but if (once again) it is serious about the desire to usher in a radically eco-centric society, then it will eventually be forced to confront the issue of massive resistance to change.

What seems common to these lifestyle strategies as I have treated them is that they mostly reject the idea that bringing about change is a properly 'political' affair—they do not hold that green change is principally a matter of occupy positions of political power and shifting the levers in the right direction. Spirituality is of much greater importance to the green perspective than is probably publicly realized, and this has made a significant impression on some activists in the movement with regard to how change might come about. Rudolf Bahro's writings from the period of his increasing disillusionment with die Grünen and the parliamentary strategy are the locus classics of what we might tentatively call the 'religious' approach to green change.

The general point behind the religious approach is that the changes that need to take place are too profound to be dealt with in the political arena, and that the proper territory for action is the psyche rather than the parliamentary chamber. This approach takes seriously the point made above—namely, that political opposition to radical green change would be massive—and side-steps it.

**Communities**

A general problem with the strategy of lifestyle change is that it is ultimately divorced from where it wants to go, in that it is not obvious how the individualism on which it is based will
convert into the communitarianism that is central to most descriptions of the sustainable society. It would appear more sensible to subscribe to forms of political action that are already communitarian, and that are therefore both a practice and anticipation of the advertised goal. In this sense the future is built into the present and the programme is more intellectually convincing and practically coherent.

In this context Robyn Eckersley has argued that "The revolutionary subject is... the active, responsible person-in-community, homo communis, if you like" (1987: 39). She goes on to suggest, in a vein referred to above, that this is because "perhaps the ultimate principle of ecopraxis is the need to maintain consistency between means and ends" (Ibid. 21). Consequently, "the most revolutionary structures are seen to be those that foster the development of self-help, community responsibility and free activity and are consistent with the ecotopian ideal of a loose federation of regions and communes" (ibid. 22).

Community strategies might be an improvement on lifestyle strategies, then, because they are already a practice of the future in a more complete sense than that allowed by changes in individual behaviour patterns. They are more clearly an alternative to existing norms and practices, and, to the extent that they work, they show that it is possible to live differently—even sustainably. Rudolf Bahro has expressed it as follows:

To bring it down to the basic concept, we must build up areas liberated from the industrial system. That means, liberated from nuclear weapons and from supermarkets. What we are talking about is a new social formation and a different civilisation. (Bahro 1986: 29)

Obviously not just any communities will do. It is not enough to say that 'a major priority for both reds and greens is the campaign to win for communities, greater control over their environment' (Weston 1986: 160), without those communities having a clear idea of how they might operate sustainably. In this context, the kinds of communities that advertise for ecological lifestyles are rural self-sufficiency farms, city farms, some workers' co-operatives, some kinds of squat throughout the cities of Europe, and, more concretely in Britain, the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) at Machynlleth in Wales and the Findhorn community in Scotland. In 1991, David Pepper published the results of a series of interviews with more than eighty commune members from twelve communes in England, Scotland and Wales (Pepper 1991). Using a measure of 'greenness' revolving around ecologically sound practices such as the sharing of resources, recycling, cutting energy use and so on, Pepper comes to the conclusion that

communards [those studied, at least] have a world view that is indeed radically and overwhelmingly green. This view translates rather patchily into individual and group practices, but it is probably true that communards can provide an institutional context which encourages ecologically sound practices. (Pepper 1991: 156)

The Schwarzes have observed that 'these ventures operate outside and potentially in opposition to, the prevailing culture' (1987: 73), and with that they may have put their finger on the necessary defining characteristic of any strategy that hopes to bring about radical change. In the section on parliamentary change, it was suggested that initiatives in and around the legislature were too
e society completely. In this inciting active, to suggest praxis, 'The self-help, a loose sense they hang on — even m. That w social as an environment might be logical kinds are for unity in more l Wales practices s to the seemingly true that (Pepper position unnecessary on were too easily absorbed, and thus neutralized, by their context. Initiatives that live 'outside' the prevailing culture and its diversionary channels have a much brighter chance of remaining oppositional and therefore of bringing about radical change.

However, even this needs to be qualified because 'to be outside' and 'to be oppositional' are not the same thing, and the difference is crucial in terms of understanding the options for green political strategy. This is because it can be argued that the dominant set of modes and practices need an opposition against which to define itself and with respect to which to judge itself. In this sense the polarity that opposition sets up helps to sustain and reproduce that which it opposes. One can see this phenomenon in operation at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. At the outset the community at the Centre intended to be 'outside' the prevailing culture, independent of the National Electricity Grid and living a daily life organized around radically democratic and sustainable principles: 'low-tech methods, reduced or simplified methods of consumption', job-rotation, personal growth, priority to collective resources, blurring the distinction of work/non-work, a strong emphasis on community life, and 'living the technology'. (Harper n.d.: 4). But, as the same member of the community put it, 'Gradually the bloom faded. I watched it happen myself. A combination of hard experience, exhaustion, human frailty, pressures of family life, a desire to be acceptable to ordinary humanity, ageing... turned me into a reluctant moderate' (ibid. 2). One CAT member in Pepper's commune study argued that the Quarry (the Centre is built around an old slate quarry) was now a way for people already into social change to renew their batteries. But it's not a way to change society. I'd like the green movement to promote communes, but it's more important for it to get political power' (Pepper 1991: 181).

This journey towards moderation must be the story of a thousand alternative communities that have found that opposition ends up at incorporation. Now the CAT processes thousands of visitors a year who come from all over the world and pay money to look in on an experiment that, by virtue of the visitors themselves, is shown to have lapsed.

Of course it might be argued that the respectability produced by becoming part of the system is precisely the Centre's strongest card in the context of persuading visitors to go home and practice the kind of lifestyle change described above. The CAT's success will lie in raising an environmental consciousness rather than in providing a 'liberated zone' (in Rudolf Bahro's evocative phrase) of sustainable living, and this is the distinction Harper was pointing to in describing the Centre as a 'successful institution' rather than a 'community'.

Most community initiatives, then, oppose the prevailing culture rather than live outside it. Just what 'living outside' means, and how far it is even possible, will be discussed shortly, but it seems clear that part of the reason why community initiatives have not brought about the 'fundamental shift' that Jonathon Porritt mentioned at the beginning of the chapter is because their opposition is easily neutralized and, indeed, turns out to be necessary for the very survival and reproduction of that which it opposes. What I have called community strategies are arguably an improvement on lifestyle change because they make more ready connections between present practice and future aspirations. However, besides easy neutralization, such strategies depend too heavily (like their lifestyle counterparts) on change by example. They may indeed show us that sustainable styles of life are possible, but as agents for political change they rely entirely on their
seductive capacity. The problem is that people refuse to be seduced: rather than producing radical changes in consciousness, sustainable communities perform the role of the surrogate good conscience, and we can go at the weekend to see it operating.

Direct Action

As far as individual actors in the green movement are concerned, of course, all the approaches to green change discussed above can be combined. Any one person could be (and most likely will be) a member of a green party as well as a buyer of Reower washing-up liquid. S/he might also live in a community which was trying to turn the world green by example. More recently, in Britain at least, s/he might also have been one of the many thousands of people battling it out—sometimes violently, sometimes not—with building contractors intent on carrying out the government's road-building programme. Direct action to halt what protestors see as environmental degradation has become an increasingly prominent feature of the political scene in recent years, and it is carried out by an apparently disparate collection of people, ranging from middle-class 'Nimby' through to New Age travellers. Disillusionment with mainstream political parties and the agendas they promote has given rise to a form of do-it-yourself politics: groups of (mostly) young people organize around a squat, a sound system, a drug, a piece of land, and try live a self-reliant life.

Perhaps because of the very feeling of isolation a growing number of what can only be described as 'tribes' have been popping up quietly all over the country... Although they all have different identities and aims, when it comes to their motivation, these groups all speak with one voice. They talk about a resurgence of the free-spirit movement... a quiet dignity that refuses to be bought up in the fast-track of winners and losers, fashions and fads... Who knows when this spirit began to speed up from a trickle to a wave but certainly in the past few recession-hit years, a network of the skint but proud has slowly been falling into place. (Pod, 1994, p. 7)

The politics of these groups varies, but a number are moved by concerns that motivate the wider green movement—such as opposition to the road-building programme. Rather than (or sometimes, in the case of more traditional protestors, as well as) lobbying their Members of Parliament or joining a mainstream pressure group, activists choose to oppose the roads through direct action. This usually takes the form of a continuing presence at the site in question (if possible) and non-violent (normally) resistance to contractors when they appear for work. Some celebrated battles between contractors and protestors took place in this context in the South of England in the summer of 1994, and opposition to one motorway in particular gave rise to perhaps the best-known 'tribe' of all—the Dongas. One member of the Dongas explains how her opposition to the motorway constitutes part of a world-view which is recognizably green: 'We've gone back to the essence of what life is all about, living with the land rather than destroying it. We've learned to appreciate the basic things like the warmth of a fire and the natural world around us' (Pod, 1994, p. 20). She also shares the decentralist impulse that informs much green political design: 'Looking on the outside, I think everything has become too centralised. A few
bods in London controlling areas they've never seen. Local areas should be controlled by local communities' (ibid. 20).

In international terms the best-known direct action environmental group is undoubtedly Earth First! Earth First! was founded in 1980 by a group of activists in the United States of America concerned that timid campaigning was doing too little too late to save the planet. From the outset, Earth First! recommended direct action (or what they call ‘monkeywrenching’, after their techniques for disabling bulldozers and other heavy machinery) as a strategy for opposing industrialism and preserving wilderness. Their activities have drawn criticism from both inside and outside the green movement, and they are variously accused of valuing animals and trees above human beings, of endangering human life, and of getting the rest of the movement a bad name.

Monkeywrenching is not unprincipled, however. Dave Foreman—an erstwhile central figure in Earth First! and Bill Haywood compiled a Field Guide to Monkeywrenching (1989), in which the principles of sabotage and its political effectiveness are explained and discussed. Above all, Foreman writes that monkeywrenching is non-violent in respect of persons. Earth First! received adverse publicity during its campaign to spike trees with long nails to prevent them being cut down, because of the possibility of injury to loggers from their own saws. The ‘Field Guide’ consequently carefully explains that nails should be driven in high enough up the tree to prevent loggers’ access. The intention is to damage industrial saws in the mill rather than injure the loggers themselves (Foreman and Haywood 1989: 14–17).

The political intentions of Earth First! sabotage are to increase the operating costs of environmentally destructive businesses, to raise public awareness regarding environmental despoliation, and (interestingly) to increase the respectability of more mainstream environmentalists (pp. 21–3). Judging the effectiveness of direct action is a hazardous business: it is extremely difficult to trace effect back to cause with any degree of certainty. Earth First!'s intentions, outlined above, might be taken as the yardstick by which any direct action group's success should be measured, and I think it would be hard to deny success in these terms to the various groups engaged in the road-building opposition described earlier.

Yet the motorway was still completed, even if a little behind schedule. Direct action supporters would no doubt see this as a case of 'lose a battle, win the war', and they could now point to the government's apparent intention of cutting back its road-building programme as evidence of their longer term success. Cynics, though, will say that this has more to do with pressure from Conservative Members of Parliament in the South of England worried about losing their seats in the next general election than with protestors risking their lives by lying down in front of bulldozers.

Class

Sometimes greens speak as though a simple 'change of consciousness' is enough to bring about radical shifts in social and political life. Generally speaking, this kind of sentiment is accompanied by an exhortation to education as a necessary preface to conversion. However, as David
Pepper has rightly observed, 'people will not change their values just through being “taught” different ones' (Pepper 1984: 224). Pepper goes on: 'What, then, is the real way forward, if it is not to be solely or even largely through education? It must be through seeking reform at the material base of society, concurrent with educational change' (ibid., emphasis in the original). Quite—but how?

The answer to this question might just turn on initially side-stepping it and asking instead: 'Who is best placed to bring about social change?' A central characteristic of green political theory is that it has never consistently asked that question, principally because the answer is held to be obvious: everyone. The general political-ecological position that the environmental crisis will eventually be suffered by everybody on the planet, and that therefore the ideology’s appeal is universal, has been perceived as a source of strength for the green movement. What could be better, from the point of view of advertising an idea, than to be able to claim that failure to embrace it might result in a global catastrophe that would leave no one untouched? From the present point of view this may be the movement’s basic strategic political error because the universalist appeal is, properly speaking, Utopian. It is simply untrue to say that, given present conditions, it is in everybody’s interest to bring about a sustainable and egalitarian society. A significant and influential proportion of society, for example, has a material interest in prolonging the environmental crisis because there is money to be made from managing it. It is Utopian to consider these people to be a part of the engine for profound social change.

Perhaps the most sophisticated expression of the universalist approach comes from Rudolf Bahro:

If proceeding from these assumptions we are seeking a hegemonic project and want to keep to the level of the overall interest of humanity—which is what Marx had in mind with the world-historic mission of the proletariat—we must go beyond Marx’s own concept and direct ourselves to a more general subject than the western working-class of today. Like the utopian socialists and communists who Marx sought to dispense with, we must once again take the species interest as our fundamental point of reference. (Bahro 1982: 65)

Bahro’s point here, couched in language expressive of his Marxist background, is that the social subject to which we must look in order to bring about change is not this or that social class but the whole human race. Again, he writes that ‘from all appearances... the organizing factors which can bring the alternative forces together and give them a social co-ordination (as must be desired) will in future not be any particular class interest, but rather a long-term human interest’ (ibid. 15). As I pointed out earlier, he can argue this because it appears transparent that the threatened environmental crisis will not discriminate between classes—the catastrophe, if it is to come, will be visited upon everybody. While this may be true in the long run, it is not necessarily the best point from which to plan immediate political strategy.

Generally, it is simply not in the immediate interests of everybody to usher in sustainable society. The Limits to Growth report remarks that,

The majority of the world’s people are concerned with matters that affect only family or friends over a short period of time. Others look farther ahead in time or over a larger area—a city or a nation. Only a very few people have a global perspective that extends far into the future. (Meadows et al. 1974: 19)
This captures the problem of persuasion with which the green movement is confronted. Somehow people are required to begin to think in global terms and with respect to events that might or might not occur generations hence. Only a very few people think like that and they are precisely the people who already live in sustainable communities, refuse to use chemical pesticides in the garden, and flush the toilet only when they really have to. If these people constitute a vanguard, it is hard at present to see how they are going to drag large numbers of people with them. In the light of this, class theory has it that radical greens must abandon their Utopian, universalistic strategy and instead identify and organize a group of people in society whose immediate interests lie in living the dark-green life, with all that that implies.

With respect to everything that has been said so far about green strategies for political change, it is interesting to look at the critique that Marx made of the Utopian socialists of the early nineteenth century (without jumping to the conclusion that this endorses everything Marx had to say, or comprises an embryonic Marxist critique of ecologism as a whole). This is what he said of them:

They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see it the best possible goal of the best possible state of society? Hence they reject all political, and especially revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and hence, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social gospel. (From: The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), in Feuer, 1976: 79)

Word for word, these comments literally describe most present green, as well as Utopian socialist, approaches to political change. Marx makes two principal criticisms here, each of which contributes to his characterization of the type of socialism to which he refers as 'Utopian'. First, that Utopian socialism's appeal was counter-productive; it was objectively impossible to expect all classes to usher in socialism. Second, that its strategy of change through 'small experiments' and 'force of example' was an unfounded attempt to change people without changing the conditions in which they lived and worked. Both of these criticisms of Utopian political strategy are relevant to the contemporary green movement.

It is well known that Marx's solution to the problem posed by the false universal appeal of the Utopian socialists was to recommend the identification and formation of a class in society (given the right historical conditions) whose prime interest lay in changing that society. This is how he put it in his Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right of 1844:

Where is there then, a real possibility of emancipation in Germany? This is our reply. A class must be formed which has radical chains; a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which is done to it is not a particular wrong, but wrong in general. There must be formed a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status, a sphere which is not opposed to particular consequences but is totally opposed to the assumptions of the German political system, a sphere which finally cannot emancipate itself without therefore emancipating all those other spheres, which is, in short, a total loss of humanity and
which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity. (In Bottomore and Rubel 1984:190; emphasis in original)

According to Marx, then, the basic characteristics of the 'sphere of society' (or 'class') capable of bringing about profound social change were as follows: first, it had to have 'radical chains'; such that, second, its emancipation would involve the general emancipation of humanity; and third, it had to be opposed not just to the 'particular consequences' of a political system but to its general 'assumptions'. For Marx, of course, this class with a universal historical mission was the proletariat. It is not novel to point out that the proletariat has not proved to be the class that Marx thought it was: its claims were not so radical that it questioned the assumptions of the political system, and its emancipation (while anyway only partial and material) has not led to the emancipation of humanity.

We are left, then, with a critique of Utopian (in Marx's rather specialized sense) political strategies, and how he considers it possible to transcend them.

We have already established that green ideologues are typically averse to class theories of politics because they believe them divisively to undermine the green universal appeal. There has, though, been some discussion of the general issue of agents for change in green literature. Two suggestions can briefly be followed up: that of the middle class as the instigators of change, and the potentially central role of the 'new social movements', such as feminism, the peace movement, gays and so on.

Jonathon Porritt presents a classic formulation of the first position:

one must of course acknowledge that the post-industrial revolution is likely to be pioneered by middle-class people. The reasons are simple: such people not only have more chance of working out where their own genuine self-interest lies, but they also have the flexibility and security to act upon such insights. (Porritt 1984:116)

Much depends here on just what one understands by 'pioneer'. If Porritt means simply the questioning of current social and political practices and the presentation of alternatives, then the middle class clearly has a central role to play. Indeed, there is plenty of sociological evidence to show that the environmental movement is preponderantly a middle-class affair. Just why this is the case is hotly disputed, but the debate suggests that throwing one's eggs prematurely in the middle-class basket could be a mistake. The general position combines two suggestions: first, that rises in post-war living standards have shifted political goals (for some) away from material concerns and towards 'quality of life' issues (Inglehart 1977); and second, that a 'new' middle class of non-marketed professionals (educationalists, health workers, etc.) have occupations that are conducive to the generation and pursing of green values.

Luke Martell, though (for example) has doubts regarding the long-term position of this middle class in radical green politics on the grounds that 'it is difficult to see a basis for economic interest in middle-class concern for the environment' (1994:130). He points out that

[Radical environmentalism argues for slowing down growth and rates of consumption. A comfortable group, but which sees itself to be materially disadvantaged relative to otherwise comparable groups, would not be likely to perceive cuts in growth as in its interest. (Martell 1994:130)]
This kind of observation renders Porritt's faith in the middle class somewhat problematic.

Beyond the middle class, one sometimes reads that the 'new social movements' represent new forms of political activity that anticipate new forms of society. Fritjof Capra, for example, writes of a 'winning majority' of 'environmentalists, feminists, ethnic minorities etc., and then that 'the new coalitions should be able to turn the paradigm shift into political reality' (1983: 485). More explicitly, Murray Bookchin refers to 'the new classes' and argues that they are 'united more by cultural ties than economic ones: ethnic, women, counter-cultural people, environmentalists, the aged, the déclassé, unemployables or unemployed, the "ghetto" people' (1986: 152).

Similarly Jurgen Habermas, who is of course not a representative of the green movement itself, has theorized a 'new politics' centering on 'the peace movement, the anti-nuclear and environmental movement, minority liberation movements, the movement for alliterative lifestyles, the tax protest movement, religious fundamentalist protest groups and, finally, the women's movement' (Roderick 1986: 136). Habermas goes on to make an important distinction that helps us to make some sense of the social pot-pourri offered up by himself, Capra and Bookchin. He argues that not all of these groups have the same emancipatory potential, and suggests that we distinguish between those that seek 'particularistic' change and those that seek fundamental change from a universalist viewpoint (ibid.). This ought to remind us of the quotation from Marx cited earlier in which he argued that the source of social change must be found in a sphere which is not opposed to particular consequences but is totally opposed to the assumptions of the German political system. 'For Habermas,' continues Roderick, 'at the present time only the women's movement belongs to this latter category to the extent that it seeks not only a formal equality, but also a fundamental change in the social structure and in real concrete life situation' (ibid.).

This is a very important observation, particularly in the context of the most typical critique of social movements as agents for social change: i.e. that they have no common interest and therefore cannot act coherently. As Boris Frankel has written, for example, 'women, environmentalists, peace activists, gays, etc., do not have a ready-formed identity as a social movement' (1987: 235). This is undoubtedly true, but with reference to Habermas's distinction it is hardly important. The crucial project would be not to manufacture an identity between heterogeneous groups, but to identify that group (or those groups) whose project most profoundly questions the presuppositions on which present social practices depend. Only such a group can already be in a sufficiently 'disengaged' position to resist the attempts at colonization by the system that it seeks to overcome, and even then, of course, success is by no means guaranteed.

The point of all this is to suggest that a possible strategy for the green movement would be to identify and foment a group in society that is not only relatively 'disengaged' from it, but that also is already inclined towards the foundations of sustainable living. This will be the agent for radical green change.

Central difficulties with the class-based strategy for green change remain, however. Even assuming that the class has been formed, one is left with the problem of how it is going to act. Is it, for example, envisaged as some sort of revolutionary political subject? If so, then the class is confronted with a series of classic problems: the stability of current political systems [in the West
at least), the issue of revolutionary organization, and (particularly difficult for non-violent greens) waging the revolutionary struggle.

If, on the other hand, reformist strategies are chosen and the class operates through pressure groups or a parliamentary party, then all of the dilemmas and difficulties referred to in the first part of this chapter resurface. 'How far should compromise be taken?'; 'How should elections be contested?'; 'Is election a realistic possibility anyway?' Intermediate strategies do present themselves, such as building up green communities through local money schemes (perhaps focused on unemployment centres), but all thoughts of green class action seem vitiated by the fact that no unified sense of such a class is presently in sight.

**Conclusion**

Discussion of any aspect of green politics is always dogged by the necessity to distinguish between its dark-green and light-green, or environmental, manifestations. The issue of green social change is no exception. From a light-green point of view, for instance, the reflections which took place under the heading 'class' will probably seem superfluous. It appears self-evident that a parliamentary presence, or pressure through the lobby system can bring about a cleaner, more sustainably environment. It appears self-evident that we can lead more environment-friendly lives by buying the right things and refusing to buy the wrong ones. It also appears self-evident that sustainable communities are vital as sources of inspiration for the rest of us to live more lightly on the earth.

But from ecologism's point of view all of these strategies must be measured in terms of a radical green critique of present practices, and the kind of life it is suggested we need to lead to overcome them. Bringing about that kind of sustainable society is an infinitely more difficult task than simply putting environmentalism on the political agenda. So far, that is what the strategies adopted have done, and taking radical green politics seriously—rather than some attenuated environmentalist version of it—might involve a move beyond those strategies.

**Notes**

1. Some progress is being made in this respect, and the connections between poverty and environmental degradation are powerfully expressed by the environmental justice movement in the United States. As Andrew Szasz has written, 'Toxic victims are, typically, poor or working people of modest means. Their environmental problems are inseparable from their economic condition. People are more likely to live near polluted industrial sites if they live in financially strapped communities' (Száz 1994: 151). In the context for the search for a group coalescing around an issue which has broad social and political implications, it is interesting to read that the hazardous waste movement 'increasingly defines its environmental mission in terms of a larger critique of society... It even envisions a future in which grass-roots environmentalism spearheads the reconstitution of a broad social justice movement' (ibid. 166). See the section in this collection on Environmental Justice.
References