THINKING ABOUT ECOLOGISM

Having written the last two general election manifestos for the Ecology Party, I would be hard put even now to say what our ideology is.

(Porritt, 1984a, p. 9)

In the introduction I began to establish three points: first, that ecologism is not the same as environmentalism; second, that environmentalism is not a political ideology; and third, that while environmentalism is sufficiently non-specific for it to be hybridized with most ideologies, it is at its most uncomfortable with ecologism. I should say at the outset that these points set my views at odds with most of those who have written recently on political ecology as ideology. The more common position is that both environmentalism and ecologism need to be considered when green ideology is at issue, with writers typically offering a 'spectrum' of green ideology with all the necessary attendant features such as 'wings' and 'centres'. Elsewhere I have referred to these two approaches to green ideology as 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' (Dobson, 1993). Maximalist commentators define ecologism tightly: 'people and ideas will have to pass stringent tests before they can be properly called political-ecological', while minimalists 'cast their net wider so that the definition of ecologism is subject to fewer and/or less stringent conditions' (ibid., 1993, p. 220). It will be clear that I take a maximalist position, partly because of the ground rules that I consider any description of any ideology must follow, which are betrayed by including environmentalism as a wing within a description of green ideology, partly because the submerging of ecologism in environmentalism is a danger of skewing the intellectual and political landscape, and partly because of how little the minimalist position actually adds to saying.

At the risk of being boringly repetitive, I want to emphasize that the maximalist approach is at its most appropriate when the issue of green politics is ideology is at stake. If the rubric is green political thinking in general then minimalism is fine, and a number of commentators have made productive use of the long-frontiered spectrum that then becomes available (see, for example, Young, 1992). I myself felt somewhat liberated at being asked on one occasion to write on 'environmentalism' rather than 'ecologism' (Dobson, 1994) — yet there are disadvantages, and vagueness is one of them.

Andrew Vincent has written the most articulate and robust accounts from the minimalist position that I have come across (Vincent, 1992 and 1993), but even he concludes with some rather limp-looking 'broad themes' in (what he calls) green ideology:

most [political ecologists] assert the systematic interdependence of species and the environment . . . [and] . . . there is a tendency to be minimally sceptical about the supreme position of human beings on the planet. Furthermore there is a general anxiety about what industrial civilisation is actually doing to the planet.

(Vincent, 1993, p. 270)

Vincent's fourth theme — that there is 'a much less damaging and more positive attitude to nature' than in other ideologies — is only uncontroversially true of (what I call) ecologism rather than of environmentalism, so it should not really be in his 'broad theme' list at all. The second and third points are rather watered down by the words 'tendency', 'minimally', and 'general', and the first three points (with the possible exception of the second) are so general as to be acceptable to a large number of people in modern industrial societies today — certainly a larger number than would style themselves political ecologists. Either, then, ecologism is one of the most successful ideologies of the modern era, or it is something other than that captured under Vincent's broad themes. What follows assumes that the latter surmise is the correct one.

But it is only right, first, to outline two advantages of the minimalist position, both of which are passed up in the present approach. The first is that it reflects clearly the rather eclectic nature of the green movement itself. Many of the people and organizations whom we would want to include in the green movement are environmentalist rather than political-ecologist, and defining ecologism as strictly as I want to can obscure this very important truth about green politics. (On the other hand, of course, overstressing the environmentalist credentials of the movement can hide ecologism from view.)

The second advantage is that the minimalist approach allows us
to see that the movement has a history—a fact which is less obvious from the maximalist point of view because it tends to date the existence of ecologism from the 1960s or even the 1970s. Minimalists will typically look to the nineteenth century for the beginnings of ecologism, and my opposition to this view is based on the observation that while some of the ideas we now associate with ecologism were flagged over a hundred years ago, this is a far cry from saying that ecologism itself existed over a hundred years ago. Jesus Christ’s cleaving to a measure of social equality did not make him a socialist, and nor does it mean that socialism existed in the first century AD. These, then, are the general issues at stake in thinking about ecologism, and they will resurface as detail in what remains of this chapter.

The need for the rethink of values advertised in the radical green agenda is derived from the belief that there are natural limits to economic and population growth. It is important to stress the word ‘natural’ because green ideologues argue that economic growth is prevented not for social reasons—such as restrictive relations of production—but because the Earth itself has a limited carrying capacity (for population), productive capacity (for resources of all types), and absorptive capacity (pollution). ‘The earth is finite’, write the authors of Beyond the Limits, sequel to the seminal The Limits to Growth report, ‘[G]rowth of anything physical, including the human population and its cars and buildings and smokestacks, cannot continue forever’ (Meadows et al., 1992, p. 7). This ought to make it clear that from a green perspective continuous growth cannot be achieved by overcoming what might appear to be temporary limits—such as those imposed by a lack of technological sophistication; continuous and unlimited growth is prima facie impossible. This theme will be pursued in Chapter 3.

At this point ecologism throws into relief a factor—the Earth itself—that has been present in all modern political ideologies but that has remained invisible, either because of its very ubiquity or because these ideologies’ schema for description and prescription have kept it hidden. Ecologism makes the Earth as physical object the very foundation-stone of its intellectual edifice, arguing that its finitude is the basic reason why infinite population and economic growth are impossible and why, consequently, profound changes in our social and political behaviour need to take place. The enduring image of this finitude is a familiar picture taken by the cameras of Apollo 8 in 1968 showing a blue-white Earth suspended in space above the moon’s horizon. Twenty years earlier the astronomer Fred

Hoyle had written that, ‘Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from the outside is available... a new idea as powerful as any other in history will be let loose’ (in Myers, 1985, p. 21). He may have been right. The green movement has adopted this image and the sense of beauty and fragility that it represents to generate concern for the Earth, arguing that everyday life in industrial society has separated us from it: ‘Those who live amid concrete, plastic, and computers can easily forget how fundamentally our well-being is linked to the land’ (ibid., p. 22). We are urged to recognize what is and has always been the case: that all wealth (of all types) ultimately derives from the planet.

**Sustainable Societies**

The centrality of the limits to growth thesis and the conclusions drawn from it lead political ecologists to suggest that radical changes in our social habits and practices are required. The kind of society that would incorporate these changes is often referred to by greens as the ‘sustainable society’, and the fact that we are able to identify aspects of a green society distinguishable from the preferred pictures of other ideologies is one of the reasons why ecologism can be seen as a political ideology in its own right.

I shall sketch what I understand the sustainable society to look like in Chapter 3, but one or two points about it should be borne in mind from the outset. Political ecologists will stress two points with regard to the sustainable society: one, that consumption of material goods by individuals in ‘advanced industrial countries’ should be reduced; and two (linked to the first), that human needs are not best satisfied by continual economic growth as we understand it today. Jonathon Porritt writes: ‘If you want one simple contrast between green and conventional politics, it is our belief that quantitative demand must be reduced, not expanded’ (Porritt, 1984a, p. 136). Greens argue that if there are limits to growth then there are limits to consumption as well. The green movement is therefore faced with the difficulty of simultaneously calling into question a major aspiration of most people—maximizing consumption of material objects—and making its position attractive.

There are two aspects to its strategy. On the one hand it argues that continued consumption at increasing levels is impossible because of the finite productive limits imposed by the Earth. So it is argued that our aspiration to consume will be curtailed whether we like it
or not: 'In common parlance that's known as having your cake and eating it, and it can't be done', announces Porrutt (ibid., p. 118). It is very important to see that greens argue that recycling or the use of renewable energy sources will not, alone, solve the problems posed by a finite Earth - we shall still not be able to produce or consume at an ever-increasing rate. Such techniques might be a part of the strategy for a sustainable society, but they do not materially affect the absolute limits to production and consumption in a finite system:

The fiction of combining present levels of consumption with 'limitless recycling' is more characteristic of the technocratic vision than of an ecological one. Recycling itself uses resources, expands energy, creates thermal pollution; on the bottom line, it's just an industrial activity like all the others. Recycling is both useful and necessary - but it is an illusion to imagine that it provides any basic answers.

(Porrutt, 1984a, p. 183)

This observation is the analogue of the distinction made earlier between environmentalism and ecologism. To paraphrase Porrutt, the recycling of waste is an essential part of being green but it is not the same thing as being radically green. Being radically green involves subscribing to different sets of values. As indicated by Porrutt above, greens are generally suspicious of purely technological solutions to environmental problems - the 'technological fix' - and the relatively cautious endorsement of recycling is just one instance of this. As long ago as the highly influential The Limits to Growth thesis it was suggested that 'We cannot expect technological solutions alone to get us out of this vicious circle' (Meadows et al., 1974, p. 192) and this has since become a central dogma of green politics.

The second strategy employed by green ideologues to make palatable their recommendation for reduced consumption is to argue for the benefits of a less materialistic society. In the first place, they make an (unoriginal) distinction between needs and wants, suggesting that many of the items we consume and that we consider to be needs are in fact wants that have been 'converted' into needs at the behest of powerful persuasive forces. In this sense they will suggest that little would be lost by possessing fewer objects. The distinction between needs and wants is highly controversial and will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

Second, some deep-greens argue that the sustainable society that would replace the present consumer society would provide for wider and more profound forms of fulfilment than that provided by the consumption of material objects. This can profitably be seen as part of the green contention that the sustainable society would be a spiritually fulfilling place in which to live. Indeed, aspects of the radical green programme can hardly be understood without reference to the spiritual dimension on which (and in which) it likes to dwell. Greens invest the natural world with spiritual content and are ambivalent about what they see as mechanistic science's robbery of such content. They demand reverence for the Earth and a rediscovery of our links with it: 'It seems to me so obvious that without some huge groundswell of spiritual concern the transition to a more sustainable way of life remains utterly improbable' (Porrutt, 1984a, p. 210). In this way the advertisement for frugal living and the exhortation to connect with the Earth combine to produce the spiritual asceticism that is so much a part of political ecology.

A controversial theme in green politics which is associated with the issue of reducing consumption is that of the need to bring down population levels. As Fritjof Capra explains: 'To slow down the rapid depletion of our natural resources, we need not only to abandon the idea of continuing economic growth, but to control the worldwide increase in population' (1985, p. 227). Despite heavy criticism, particularly from the left - Mike Simons has described Paul Ehrlich's proposals as 'an invitation to genocide' (Simons, 1988, p. 13) - greens have stuck to their belief that long-term global sustainability will involve reductions in population, principally on the grounds that fewer people will consume fewer objects: 'the only long-term way to reduce consumption is to stabilize and then reduce the number of consumers. The best resources policies are doomed to failure if not linked to population policy' (Irvine and Ponton, 1988, p. 29). The issue of population will be critically assessed in Chapter 3.

REASONS TO CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

In an obvious way, care for the environment is one of ecologism's informing (although not exhaustive) principles. Many different reasons can be given for why we should be more careful with the environment and I want to suggest that ecologism advances a specific mix of them. In this sense, the nature of the arguments advanced for care for the environment by ecologism comes to be a part of its definition.
In our context such arguments can be summarized under two
hheadings: those that suggest that human beings ought to care for the
environment because it is in our interest to do so, and those that
suggest that the environment has an intrinsic value in the sense
that it is not exhausted by its being a means to human ends — and
even if it cannot be made a means to human ends it still has
value.

Most of the time we encounter arguments of the first sort; for
example, that tropical rainforests should be preserved because they
provide oxygen, or raw materials for medicines, or because they
prevent landslides. These, though, are not radical green reasons. The
ecological perspective is neatly captured in The Green Alternative in
response to the question, ‘Isn’t concern for nature and the environ-
ment actually concern for ourselves?’:

Many people see themselves as enlightened when they argue
that the nonhuman world ought to be preserved: (i) as a
stockpile of genetic diversity for agricultural, medical and other
uses; (ii) as a resource for scientific study, for instance of
our evolutionary origins; (iii) for recreation and (iv) for
the opportunities it provides for aesthetic pleasure and spiritual
inspiration. However, although enlightened, these reasons are
all related to the instrumental value of the nonhuman world
to humans. What is missing is any sense of a more impartial,
biocentric — or biosphere-centred — view in which the non-
human world is considered to be of intrinsic value.

(Bunyard and Morgan-Grenville, 1987, p. 284)

Lurking behind this statement are complex issues, which will be
discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but in this context of thinking
about ecologism we need to make a distinction between the ‘public’
and the ‘private’ ecologist.

The private ecologist, in conversation with like-minded people,
will most likely place the intrinsic value position ahead of the
human-instrumental argument in terms of priority, suggesting that
the latter is less worthy, less profoundly ecological, than the former.
The public ecologist, however, keen to recruit, will almost certainly
appeal first to the enlightened self-interest thesis and only move on
to talk about intrinsic value once the first argument is firmly in
place.

So the political ideology of ecologism clearly wants to subscribe
to a particular set of reasons for care for the environment but is
confronted by a culture that appears to engender a crisis of confi-
dence, and that forces it to produce another set — which it would
like to see as subordinate — in public. This, then, is another characteristic of ecologism: that its public face is in danger of hiding what it ‘really’ is; and yet what it ‘really’ is is its public face.

Something similar might be said of the spirituality that one sometimes sees surfacing in the writings of ecologists. Its advocates argue that radical green politics is itself a spiritual experience in that it is founded on a recognition of the ‘oneness’ of creation and a subsequent ‘reverence for one’s own life, the life of others and the Earth itself’ (Porritt, 1984a, p. 111). Moreover, it is suggested that political change will involve such a recognition and that only green politics has the possibility of re-creating the spiritual dimension of life that the grubby materialism of the industrial age has torn asunder. This kind of talk, though, is hardly a vote-winner and so although ‘spirituality’ might be conspicuous in the ecologist’s private conversation it does not get the public airing that would seem to warrant.

In this context, another specific reason given for living ‘in’ the
environment rather than against it deserves mention. It is suggested
that the exploitation of the planet is linked to the exploitation of
people, and that the ending of the former is a precondition for the
ending of the latter. Lindy Williams, a former co-chair of the Green
Party, writes that ‘exploitation of the planet inevitably involves
exploitation of people’ (in Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1986, p. 360),
and Norman Myers believes that ‘we have the chance, quite simply,
to be the first to live in final accord with our Spaceship Earth — and
hence in final harmony with each other’ (1985, p. 258). There is
plenty of room for disagreement here, though. In a complex and
far-reaching analysis, social ecologist Murray Bookchin turns things
around and argues that ‘the very idea of dominating nature stems
from the domination of human by human’ (Bookchin, 1991, p. 131),
thereby suggesting that human emancipation is a precondition for
the emancipation of nature.

Either way round, these are strong claims to make, and there are
those who argue that it is by no means obvious that the two forms
of exploitation are linked. We can surely imagine a world, they
suggest, in which populations live sustainably with respect to the
environment, but exploitatively with respect to the social relations
within those populations (and vice versa). Sustainable societies could
take many forms and there seems no necessary reason why they
should be any less exploitative of human beings than are present
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societies (and vice versa). The point here, though, is that political (and social) ecologists think that they will be, and for the specific reasons noted above.

CRISIS AND ITS POLITICAL-STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES

No presentation of ecologism would be complete without the appropriate (usually heavy) dosage of warnings of doom and gloom. Political ecologists invariably claim that dire consequences will result if their warnings are not heeded and their prescriptions not followed. Beyond the Limits provides a typical example:

Human use of many essential resources and generation of many kinds of pollutants have already surpassed rates that are physically sustainable. Without significant reductions in material and energy flows, there will be in the coming decades an uncontrolled decline in per capita food output, energy use, and industrial production.

(Meadows et al., 1992, pp. xv-xvi)

The radical green's consistent use of an Apocalyptic tone is unique in the context of modern political ideologies, and it might be argued that the movement has relied too heavily on these sorts of projections as a means of galvanizing people to action. The consequences of this have been twofold. First, there is the unfounded accusation by the movement's critics that it is informed by an overwhelming sense of pessimism as to the prospects of the planet and the human race along with it. The accusation is unfounded because the movement's pessimism relates only to the likely life expectancy of current social and political practice. Greens are generally unerringly optimistic with respect to our chances of dealing with the crisis they believe they have uncovered—they merely argue that a major change of direction is required. As Beyond the Limits concludes:

[This] decline is not inevitable. To avoid it two changes are necessary. The first is a comprehensive revision of policies and practices that perpetuate growth in material consumption and in population. The second is a rapid, drastic increase in the efficiency with which materials and energy are used.

(Meadows et al., 1992, p. xvi)

The second and perhaps more serious consequence of the move-

ment's reliance on gloomy prognostications is that its ideologues appear to have felt themselves absolved from serious thinking about realizing the change they advertise. This, indeed, is another feature of the ideology that ought to be noted: the tension between the radical nature of the social and political change that it seeks, and the reliance on traditional liberal-democratic means of bringing it about. It is as though the movement's advocates have felt that the message was so obvious that it only needed to be given for it to be acted upon. The obstacles to radical green change have not been properly identified, and the result is an ideology that lacks an adequate programme for social and political transformation. Further comment on this will be made in Chapter 4.

UNIVERSALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A related feature that ought to be mentioned, however, is the potentially universal appeal of the ideology. Up to now it has not been aimed at any particular section of society but is addressed to every single individual on the planet regardless of colour, gender, class, nationality, religious belief, and so on. This is a function of the green movement's argument that environmental degradation and the social dislocation that goes with it are everybody's problem and therefore ought to be everybody's concern: 'we are all harmed by the ecological crisis and therefore we all have a common interest in uniting together with people of all classes and all political allegiances to counter this mutually shared threat' (Tatchell in Dodds, 1988, p. 45; emphasis in the original). Ecologism thus has the potential to argue more easily than most modern political ideologies that it is, literally, in everyone's interest to follow its prescriptions.

This is not so obviously true of other modern political ideologies. None of them is able to argue that the penalty for not following its advice is the threat of major environmental and social dislocation for everyone. The potentially universal appeal generated by this observation has undoubtedly been seen by the green movement as a positive characteristic, to be exploited for all it is worth. I shall examine this position in Chapter 4 and ask whether or not this belief is misplaced, and whether it has in fact been counter-productive in the sense of providing another reason for not attending sufficiently rigorously to the issue of social change.
LESSONS FROM NATURE

The importance of nature to ecologism, already identified, is not exhausted by reasons why we should care for it. Ecologism's thoroughgoing naturalism rests on the belief that human beings are natural creatures. On the one hand, this may involve the recognition (already canvassed) that there are natural limits to human aspirations; on the other – and even more controversially – there is often a strong sense in which the natural world is taken as a model for the human world, and many of ecologism's prescriptions for political and social arrangements are derived from a particular view of how nature 'is'. This view – not surprisingly, is an ecological view. 'Professional ecologists', writes Junathon Porritt, 'study plant and animal systems in relation to their environment, with particular emphasis on the inter-relations and interdependence between different life forms' (1984a, p. 3). This characterization conveys the benign sense of nature that has been adopted by political ecologists. This is a natural world in which interdependence is given priority over competition and in which equality comes before hierarchy. Nature for ecologism is not 'red in tooth and claw' but pacific, tranquil, lush – and green.

The principal features of the natural world and the political and social conclusions or prescriptions that have been drawn from them are:

- diversity
- interdependence
- longevity
- nature as 'female'
- tolerance, stability and democracy
- equality
- tradition
- a particular conception of feminism

These points will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, but some introductory remarks are in order here. First, they stand in some tension to one another, and they are radically underspecified. Just what kind of equality and democracy can be 'derived' from nature? And is it not the case that democracy and tradition, or tradition and equality, are potentially incompatible? The problems associated with a list of this kind are such, indeed, that Michael Saward has been led to suggest that 'the vagueness and incompatibilities in the table render it next to meaningless' (Saward, 1993a, p. 69). Meaningless in political-theoretical terms, perhaps, but useful from an ideological point of view where persuasion is so important.

Rooting one's political prescriptions in a reading of nature is risky because of the lack of determinacy involved, but the symbolic potency acquired by doing so may make the price of vagueness worth paying (or even render it irrelevant). Ideologies seek to persuade, and sometimes this is most effectively done by enlisting the big theme rather than the theoretical detail. This is not, I stress, to say that ecologism's naturalism is unproblematic (far from it), but merely to point out that the demands of ideology and the demands of theory are rather different.

It is, then, an ecological axiom that stability in an ecosystem is a function of diversity in that ecosystem. Thus, the more diverse the flora and fauna (within limits imposed by the ecosystem) the more stable the system will be. Further, stability is seen as a positive feature of an ecosystem because it proves the system to be sustainable; an ecosystem that is subject to fluctuation has not reached the 'climax' stage and is therefore characterized as immature. Socially, this translates into the liberal aspiration of the toleration of peculiarity and generosity with respect to diverse opinions, and these are most certainly characteristics of liberalism that have been adopted by greens. There is a strong sense in ecologism that the 'healthy society' (organic metaphor intended) is one in which a range of opinions is not only tolerated but celebrated, in that this provides for a repository of ideas and forms of behaviour from which to draw when confronted with political or social problems:

Diversity must also be the codeword for the way we manage ourselves. Not only shall we need to draw from a wide range of cultural and minority options to improve the quality of our lives, but also to draw upon a broad, participatory power base in our political systems to oppose and reverse present trends towards homogeneity, over-centralization, the abuse of power, and an uncaring society.

(Myers, 1985, p. 254)

It will be suggested later (in Chapter 3) that this aspiration stands in tense relation to the potential rigidity of norms and standards in a small-scale sustainable society. To this extent, ecologism encounters a similar problem to that found in the liberal tradition from which it draws: how to have a conception of the Good Society that requires people behaving in a certain way, and yet argue for diverse forms of behaviour.

Nevertheless, it is a green maxim that dissenting voices be allowed
to speak, and in this sense ecologism subscribes to the democratic principle of government by consent. Nor is a vague sort of consent considered to be good enough: most greens argue for a radically participatory form of society in which discussion takes place and explicit consent is asked for and given across the widest possible range of political and social issues. All this implies the kind of decentralist politics often associated with the sustainable society, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Some will no doubt object that this is too rosy a view of the green movement’s political prescriptions, and that its history is full of suggestions more accurately described as authoritarian than democratic. Anna Bramwell’s history of ecology in the twentieth century (1989) certainly provokes such an impression, and it is true that even in the modern movement there was a time when avoiding environmental catastrophe was seen as the chief end, and the means used to achieve it were largely irrelevant:

It social design leading to a sustainable society] is a process that can be carried out within present authority structures whether they be democratic or dictatorial. It is not necessary, although it might be preferable, that authority relationships be changed. (Pirages, 1977b, p. 10)

This kind of agnosticism with respect to social organization was (and is) meat and drink to critics of the green movement who accuse it of political irresponsibility and reaction. The problem stems from the fact that, despite green attempts to make democracy necessarily a member of a green list of values, the link appears actually to be a contingent one. This point is powerfully put by Michael Saward, who argues that there is a tension between the green value set and the values of democracy (Saward, 1993a, pp. 70–2). Robert Goodin puts the point in its clearest form: ‘To advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantees can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter sorts of outcomes?’ (Goodin, 1992, p. 168). The clear implication is that if green outcomes are not guaranteed by democratic procedures, and if green outcomes are as important as greens say they are, then there may be a case for abandoning democratic procedures in favour of authoritarian ones.

This impasse turns, of course, on characterizing green politics as privileging outcome over procedure, and in response at least one commentator, Robyn Ekersley, turns the conundrum on its head by implying that for green politics procedure is at least as important as outcome. She does this by arguing that radical green politics is an emancipatory politics that seeks the maximization of the autonomy of human and non-human beings to ‘unfold in their own ways and according to their “species life”’ (Eckersley, forthcoming). From this point of view, she continues,

[T]he connection between ecology and democracy is no longer tenuous . . . authoritarianism is ruled out at the level of green principle (rather than on purely instrumental grounds) in the same way that it is ruled out according to liberal principle: it fundamentally infringes the rights of humans to choose their own destiny.

(Eckersley, forthcoming)

This flatly contradicts John Barry’s view that, ‘[F]rom a strictly ecocentric point of view . . . democracy is superfluous at worst or an optional extra’ (Barry, 1994, p. 371) – further evidence (if we needed it) that green theory is alive and kicking.

Eckersley’s attempt to construct a necessary connection between ecologism and democracy is not based on drawing any ‘lessons from nature’, of course, but it does importantly point up the stakes involved in interpreting ecologism as an ideology of process or outcome. The implications, indeed, point beyond the relationship between ecologism and democracy towards the relationship between ecologism and other ideologies. As Eckersley herself points out, aligning ecologism with process places it in the liberal tradition. John Gray on the other hand, feels able to claim conservative friends for ecologism by viewing the latter in consequentialist terms: ‘[F]or conservatives as for Green thinkers, it is clear that choice-making has in itself little or no value: what has value are the choices that are made and the options that are available’ (Gray, 1993, p. 137). In practical terms, for what it is worth, Gray has got it wrong: the green movement in its modern form can confidently be said to have abandoned authoritarian solutions to the environmental crisis.

This point is reinforced by ecologism’s next political ‘lesson from nature’. The view of the natural world as an interlocking system of interdependent objects (both sentient and non-sentient) generates a sense of equality, in that each item is held to be necessary for the viability of every other item. In this view no part of the natural world is independent and therefore no part can lay claim to ‘superiority’.
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Without the humble bacteria that clean our gut wall, for example, human beings would be permanently ill. Likewise, those particular bacteria need our gut in which to live.

There is a sense, then, in which every relationship -- from an ecological point of view -- is a symbiotic relationship, and it is this that makes for a sense of equality. Moreover, this is a strong sense of equality in that it is held to be based on a directly observable principle of equality. There is no need to have recourse to abstractions (such as the 'thin' human being of liberalism) to generate it. From this point of view the boot is on the other foot as far as arguments about the possibility of equality are concerned. It has traditionally been a powerful anti-egalitarian position that, given the manifest inequality of human beings and species, the onus is on the egalitarians to show why they should be treated equally. Ecologists will argue that equality is at least as 'observable' as inequality and that therefore it is the egalitarians who should shoulder the burden of persuasion. It might be objected, though, that interdependence need not necessarily imply equality -- it is not hard to think of situations in which interdependence would probably be admitted but equality certainly would not: the relationship between a landlord and a villedin, for example, or between a working mother and her home help.

The fact of the longevity of the natural world is not, obviously, an observation specific to ecology, but nevertheless it has important ramifications for political ecologists. In a sense it is argued for the natural world that whatever is, is good, provided that it has not been meddling with by human beings with ideas above their station. Nature speaks with the wisdom born of long experience and attendance to 'her' lessons guarantees the best of all possible outcomes. The contrast between our puny modern knowledge and the tools it produces, and the rich vein of wisdom generated by forebears with an ear to the ground is clear.

In modern farming the farm worker is increasingly isolated from the soil he is tilling; he sits encased in his tractor cab, either with ear muffs to shut out the noise or with radio blaring, and what goes on behind the tractor has more to do with the wonders of technology than with the wisdom of countless generations of his predecessors.

(Bunyard and Morgan-Grenville, 1987, p. 71)

As with farming, so with politics. Ecologists argue that we should live with, rather than against, the natural world, and this has significant repercussions in the context of the kind of community in which we would have us live. At the same time, the natural world's longevity can help generate a sense of awe and humility and thus contribute to the move away from anthropocentrism that the green movement considers necessary. 'The ecological approach . . . introduces an important note of humility and compassion into our understanding of our place on earth' (Eckersley, 1987, p. 10).

Not only, however, is nature held to be our best teacher, but 'she' is also female. This has important consequences for the feminism to which ecologism subscribes, because there is a tendency to map nature's beneficial characteristics onto the 'female personality'. Thus, and women come to be tender, nurturing, caring, sensitive to place, and substantially defined by the (high) office of giving birth to life. To the extent that much feminist momentum has been geared towards ridding the woman of stereotypical behaviour and character patterns, this ecological vision might seem retrograde. More pertinent, the features of this vision (if we assume women actually possess them to the general exclusion of other characteristics) are precisely those that have consigned women to an inferior status because they are held to be subordinate qualities. It will probably be of little comfort to some feminists that ecologism seeks to turn the tables in this context, arguing that the predominance of 'male' values is part of the reason for the crisis that they have identified, and that nature's 'female' lead is the one to follow. Brian Tokar puts it like this: 'The values of nurturance, cooperation and sharing which are traditionally identified more closely with women than with men need to become the deepest underlying principles of our society' (1994, p. 91). These are important matters for ecologism and for feminism, both because ecologism claims feminism as a guiding star (not least in terms of how to 'do' politics) and because some feminists have balked at the kind of feminism shunted into ecological service. Much more will be made of this debate in Chapter 5.

LEFT AND RIGHT: COMMUNISM AND CAPITALISM

In standard political terms and in order to help distinguish ecologism from other political ideologies, it is useful to examine the widespread green claim to 'go beyond' the left-right political spectrum: 'In calling for an ecological, nonviolent, nonexploitative society, the
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Greens (die Grünen) transcend the linear span of left-to-right' (Spremak and Capra, 1985, p. 3). Jonathon Porritt translates this into a transcendence of capitalism and communism and remarks that 'the debate between the protagonists of capitalism and communism is as about uplifting as the dialogue between Tweedledum and Tweedledee' (Porritt, 1984a, p. 44). The basis for this claim is that from an ecocentric green perspective the similarities between communism and capitalism can be made to seem greater than their differences:

Both are dedicated to industrial growth, to the expansion of the means of production, to a materialist ethic as the best means of meeting people’s needs, and to unimpeded technological development. Both rely on increasing centralisation and large-scale bureaucratic control and co-ordination. From a viewpoint of narrow scientific rationalism, both insist that the planet is there to be conquered, that big is self-evidently beautiful, and that what cannot be measured is of no importance.

(Porritt, 1984a, p. 44)

The name generally given to this way of life is ‘industrialism’, which Porritt goes so far as to call a ‘super-ideology’ within which communism and capitalism are inscribed, and which describes elsewhere as ‘adherence to the belief that human needs can only be met through the permanent expansion of the process of production and consumption’ (in Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1986, pp. 343–4). This observation is central to green ideology, pointing up both the focus of attack on contemporary politics and society – industrialism – and the claim that ecologism calls into question assumptions with which we have lived for at least two centuries. Ecologists argue that discussion about the respective merits of communism and capitalism is rather like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic: they point out that industrialism suffers from the contradiction of undermining the very context in which it is possible, by unsustainably consuming a finite stock of resources in a world that does not have a limitless capacity to absorb the waste produced by the industrial process.

Although the green movement appears to view ‘left and right’ and ‘capitalism and communism’ as synonymous pairs, I want to look at them separately, if only because the terms used to examine them will be different. It ought nevertheless to be said that the green claim in both cases has come in for criticism, especially regarding the second pair, and especially from the left.

In some respects we can talk of the green movement quite happily

in terms of left and right because the terms we use to discuss the difference between the two can easily be applied to it. If, for example, we take equality and hierarchy as characteristics held to be praiseworthy within left-wing and right-wing thought respectively, then ecologism is clearly left-wing, arguing as it does for forms of equality among human beings and between human beings and other species. However, to argue that ecologism is unequivocally left-wing is not so easy. For instance, green politics in principle averse to anything but the most timid engineering of the social and natural world by human beings. Since the French Revolution it has been a theme of left-wing thought that the existence of a concrete natural order of things with which human beings should conform and not tamper is a form of medieval mumbo-jumbo used by the right to secure and ossify privilege. The left has consistently argued that the world is there to be remade in the image of ‘man’ (usually) in accordance with plans drawn up by ‘men’ (usually), and in which the only reference to a natural order is to an abstract one outside of time and place.

The radical green aspiration to insert the human being in its ‘proper place’ in the natural order and to generate a sense of humility in the face of it is clearly ‘right-wing’ in this context:

The belief that we are ‘apart from’ the rest of creation is an intrinsic feature of the dominant world-order, a man-centred or anthropocentric philosophy. Ecologists argue that this ultimately destructive belief must be rooted out and replaced with a life-centred or biocentric philosophy.

(Porritt, 1984a, p. 206)

Ecologists can only perversely be accused of using this idea to preserve wealth and privilege, but the understanding of the place of the human being in a pre-ordained and immensely complex world with which we meddle at our peril is nevertheless a right-wing thought. Joe Weston, writing from a socialist perspective, puts it like this:

Clearly, the green analysis of environmental and social issues is within the broad framework of right-wing ideology and philosophy. The belief in ‘natural’ limits to human achievement, the denial of class divisions and the Romantic view of ‘nature’ all have their roots in the conservative and liberal political divisions.

(Weston, 1986, p. 24)
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As pointed out earlier, John Gray has picked up some of this and turned it into a virtue, from a conservative point of view. He suggests that there are three ‘deep affinities’ between green and conservative thinking. The first is that ‘both conservatism and Green theory see the life of humans in a multi-generational perspective’; second, ‘[B]oth conservative and Green thinkers repudiate the shibboleth of liberal individualism, the sovereign subject, the autonomous agent whose choices are the origin of all that has value’; and third, ‘both Greens and conservatives consider risk-aversion the path of prudence when new technologies, or new social practices, have consequences that are large and unpredictable’ (Gray, 1993, pp. 136–7). Although Gray does not count a common opposition to ‘hubristic humanism’ in his list, he might have done (ibid., p. 139). The similarities Gray outlines are well chosen, but there is plenty in the detail (just what is to replace the shibboleth of the liberal individual? What are the rules for distribution across generations to be?) that may yet provide for lengthy arguments between political ecologists and conservatives – and of course there is no mention of ecocentrism (as a fundamental distinguishing characteristic) at all. More generally, the difficulty of describing ecologism as either obviously left or right wing is a legacy of its ambiguous relationship with the Enlightenment tradition referred to in the Introduction, and is consistent with its self-image of calling into question stock responses to that tradition.

Second, the green claim to transcend capitalism and communism, in the sense that ecologism calls into question an overriding feature common to them both (industrialism), has drawn heavy criticism from the left. There are two reasons for this. In the first place it brings back grim memories of the ‘end of ideology’ thesis of the 1960s. This thesis has been interpreted by the left as itself ideological in the sense of observing a putative veneer of agreement about the basic goals of society, and so obscuring and delegitimizing alternative strategies. The end of ideology position was buttressed by the convergence thesis, which argued that communist and capitalist nations were beginning to converge on a similar course of social and political action. The left pointed out that such analyses served to cement existing power relationships – particularly in the capitalist nations – and therefore performed a conservative social function.

So the left’s belief that it is not possible to transcend capitalism while capitalism still exists makes it suspicious of claims to the contrary. David Pepper, for instance, has suggested that we should not see ‘environmentalist concerns or arguments’ as ‘above’ or unrelated to traditional political concerns, but stemming from, and used very much as agents to advance, the interests of one traditional political side or the other’ (Pepper, 1984, p. 187). The general conclusion the left draws is that ecologism serves the interests of the status quo by diverting attention from the real battleground for social change: the relationship between capital and labour. We will be in a better position to assess the green claim to transcend this battleground in Chapter 3 when ecologism’s analysis and solutions to the crisis it identifies are set out, and I shall make more of ecologism’s relationship with socialism in Chapter 5. The main point for now, though, is that it is undoubtedly a central feature of ecologism that it identifies the ‘super-ideology’ of industrialism as the thesis to be undermined, and it has been relatively easy for green ideologues to point to high levels of environmental degradation in Eastern Europe to make their point that there is little to choose – from this perspective between capitalism and communism. It makes no appreciable difference who owns the means of production, they say, if the production process itself is based on doing away with the presuppositions of its very existence.

HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY

The issue of the history of ecologism has been the focus of considerable disagreement in recent commentaries. What is generally accepted is that there are three views in contention (Vincent, 1992; Dobson, 1993). The first attempts ‘to trace ecological sentiments back to the dawn of the human species, at least to the palaeolithic or neolithic period’; the second ‘dates the ecology movement from the 1960s and 1970s’; and the third ‘identifies the roots of ecological ideas in the nineteenth century’ (Vincent, 1993, pp. 210–11).

The first position is often associated with the view that many thousands of years ago there existed a golden age of peaceful coexistence with nature which ended – on Max Oelschlaeger’s reading – with the onset of the Neolithic era (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 28), and which we have (in the modern industrial world) failed to recapture to this day. Apart from the insecure nature of the evidence for such claims (disputed with some success in Lewis, 1992, pp. 43–81, for example), the links between what human beings thought tens of thousands of years ago and modern ecologism seem too tenuous to tell us much about the nature of a contemporary ideology.
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The third view – that ecologism has its roots in the nineteenth century – is probably the most widely accepted (see Vincent, 1992; Heywood, 1992; Macridis, 1992, for example), and is often based on a reading of Anna Bramwell's seminal *Ecology in the 20th Century* (1989). Among the similarities between nineteenth-century thinking (some of it anyway) and contemporary ecologism, Vincent notes: 'a critical reaction to the European Enlightenment tradition ... [E]cologism looks sceptically at the supreme value of reason', and a denial of 'the central place of human beings and [the belief] that nature is without value and can simply be manipulated by humans'; and finally the impact of Malthus and Darwin made for the integration of a 'strongly materialist and scientific perspective with an immanent and naturalistic understanding of religion and morality' (Vincent, 1992, pp. 211–12).

We might want to quibble over the detail of these claims, but it would be foolish to deny the broad parallel between the combination of scientific rationalism and Romantic arcadianism in both the nineteenth century and today's ecology movement. These (and other) parallels have been reaffirmed by Bramwell in the belief that the import of her earlier work has been largely accepted (Bramwell, 1994, pp. 25–33). Vincent believes that these parallels have been deliberately overlooked because of the rectionary political views associated with such positions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Basing his argument largely on Bramwell's work, he suggests that the carriers of ecology in this period were priythergatic conservatives and nationalists, particularly of a 'folkish' persuasion, and, later, fascists and Nazis – it is by now *de rigueur* to point out that Himmler established an organic farm at Dachau concentration camp, and that both Himmler and Hitler were vegetarians (Bramwell, 1989, pp. 204 and 270 fn.1). These, argues Vincent, are embarrassing skeletons for today's predominantly left-leaning political ecologists, and so they are confined to the cupboard by the simple expedient of dating ecologism from, say, 1966 or 1973 rather than 1866 or 1873 (the main contenders for when German biologisat Ernst Haeckel first used the word 'ecology'; ibid., p. 253 fn. 2).

Quite how much there is in this political reason for making ecologism very contemporary rather than merely modern is hard to determine, but my own contribution to the debate (for what it is worth) is to distinguish the search for the roots of ecologism from a description of the ideology itself. It is undeniable that ideas similar to those entertained by modern greens can be found in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century industrial and industrializing societies – and although Vincent does not mention the 'energy economists' of France, Britain, the USA, Russia and Germany in the first quarter of the twentieth century, he might have done (ibid., 1989, pp. 64–91). This is not, though, the same as saying that ecologism – as ideology – existed at that time, and two modern-day factors have served to bring ecologism fully into focus.

First, the scope of concerns in the modern age is new. Most of the resource, waste and pollution problems that were raised in earlier times had a fundamentally local character. Ecologism rests a large part of its case on the belief that environmental degradation has taken on a global dimension – most obviously in cases such as global warming and ozone depletion, but also in view of the potentially global climatic implications of deforestation. Humans have always interacted with their environment, of course, and not always wisely (Ponting, 1991). But greens believe that in the modern age the scale of human activity relative to the biosphere's capacity to absorb and sustain it has increased to the point where long-term human survival and the biosphere's integrity are put in doubt. This view – right or wrong – helps to distinguish ecologism from its more *ad hoc* environmentalist past and present.

Second, political ecologists believe that single-issue approaches to dealing with environmental problems do not address their seriousness at a sufficiently fundamental level. Greens campaign against acid rain, deforestation and ozone depletion, of course, but they do so by arguing that these problems stem from basic political, social and economic relations that encourage unsustainable practices. This systemic analysis leads to systemic prescriptions for change, and the interrelated and wide-ranging nature of the critique is a characteristic of modern ecologism missing from its nineteenth and early-twentieth-century progenitors.

It may be ill-advised to try to be precise about dates in this context, but *The Limits to Growth* report of 1972 is hard to beat as a symbol for the birth of ecologism in its fully contemporary guise. As Eckersley has put it: 'the notion that there might be ecological limits to economic growth that could not be overcome by human technological ingenuity and better planning was not seriously entertained until after the much publicized "limits to growth" debate of the early 1970s' (Eckersley, 1992, p. 8). This is how the report expressed its principal conclusion.
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We are convinced that realization of the quantitative restraints of the world environment and of the tragic consequences of an overshoot is essential to the initiation of new forms of thinking that will lead to a fundamental revision of human behaviour and, by implication, of the entire fabric of present-day society.

(Meadows et al., 1974, p. 190)

The sense of radical change advertised by deep greens is captured in the final phrases of this quotation, and clearly goes beyond the managerial environmentalism that I am keen to separate from ecologism proper.

Recognizing the historical situatedness of the ideology helps us to understand what it is. We are provided with a boundary beyond which (in the past) ecologism could not have existed, and therefore any movement or idea behind that boundary can bear only an informing relation to ecologism as I think we ought to understand it. Rachel Carson’s book Silent Spring (1965), then, can only inform ecologism rather than ‘be’ it because of the absence of an overriding political strategy for dealing with the problems it identifies. My suggestion is that, in 1962, ecologism (and therefore the possibility of being radically green) did not exist, and that Rachel Carson’s book and the period in which it was written are best viewed as part of the preconditions for ecologism. Looked at in this way we shall avoid the mistake made in many commentaries on and anthologies of socialism, say, which talk of the cleric John Ball (who spoke on behalf of the peasants during the rebellion of 1381) as if he were a socialist. The most that can be said of him, living as he did well before the French and Industrial Revolutions that gave birth to socialism proper, was that his sentiments were socialist. Similarly, the pre-1970 ideas and movements that have an affinity with ecologism are ‘green’ rather than green.

The final important consequence of historicizing the ideology is that it enables us to emphasize the novelty of its analysis. It has been remarked that, despite its claims to the contrary, the green movement’s perspective is merely a reworking of old themes. Thus, for example, its warnings about population growth are substantially contained in the work of Thomas Malthus; its reluctance fully to embrace the mechanistic reason characteristic of the Enlightenment was a recurrent theme in the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century; and even its Apocalyptic tone has been prefigured on countless occasions in countless Messianic movements. Such critics generally take these observations to indicate that, as has happened before, the subordinate themes associated with the green movement will eventually be submerged by their dominant and opposed counterparts. This interpretation fails to take full account of the historically specific nature of ecologism. For it is precisely the ideology’s point that, while the terms of its analysis are not new in themselves, the fact of them being posited here and now gives those terms a novel resonance. So the critique of mechanical forms of reason, for instance, cannot be directly mapped back on to similar critiques made in the nineteenth century. The additional factor to be taken into account, argues the green movement, is the potentially terminal state to which slavish usage of this reason has led us. In this way history defines the context within which ecologism operates (and therefore helps define ecologism itself), and provides the ground on which old themes acquire new resonances, coalescing to form a full-blown modern political ideology.

CONCLUSION

It needs to be stressed time and again that this is a book about ecologism and not about environmentalism. The reason that this needs to be stressed is that most people will understand environmentalism – a managerial approach to the environment within the context of present political and economic practices – to be what green politics is about. I do not think it is – at least in its political-ideological guise. Ecologists and environmentalists are both inspired to act by the environmental degradation they observe, but their strategies for remedying it differ wildly. Environmentalists do not necessarily subscribe to the limits to growth thesis, nor do they typically seek to dismantle ‘industrialism’. They are unlikely to argue for the intrinsic value of the non-human environment and would balk at any suggestion that we (as a species) require ‘metaphysical reconstruction’ (Porritt, 1984a, pp. 198–200). Environmentalists will typically believe that technology can solve the problems it creates, and will probably regard any suggestions that only ‘frugal living’ will provide for sustainability as willful nonsense. In short, what passes for green politics in the pages of today’s newspapers is not the ideology of political ecology, properly understood. This is why the student of green politics needs to do more than scratch the
surface of its public image in order to appreciate the full range of
the debate that it has opened up.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

We know that the white man does not understand our ways.
He is a stranger who comes in the night, and takes from the
land whatever he needs. The earth is not his friend, but his
enemy, and when he’s conquered it he moves on. He kidnaps
the earth from his children. His appetite will devour the earth
and leave behind a desert. If all the beasts were gone, we
would die from a great loneliness of the spirit, for whatever
happens to the beasts also happens to us. All things are connec-
ted. Whatever befalls the Earth, befalls the children of the
Earth.
(Chief Seattle, 1855; quoted in Bunyard and Morgan-Grenville,
1987, p.3)

Although it turns out that this speech was a fake, that has not
stopped greens from making liberal use of it and the sentiments it
contains. Central to the theoretical canon of green politics is the
belief that our social, political and economic problems are substan-
tially caused by our intellectual relationship with the world and the
practices that stem from it. The general targets of attack are those
forms of thought that ‘split things up’ and study them in isolation,
rather than those that ‘leave them as they are’ and study their
interdependence. The best knowledge is held to be acquired not by
the isolated examination of the parts of a system but by examining
the way in which the parts interact. This act of synthesis, and the
language of linkage and reciprocity in which it is expressed, is often
handily collected in the term ‘holism’. Thus holistic medicine is
preferable to interventionist surgery, and ecology – which studies
‘wholes’ rather than ‘parts’ – is preferable to biology. Greater recog-
nition of mutual dependence and influence, it is argued, will encour-
ge a sensitivity in our dealings with the ‘natural’ world that discrete
atomism has conspicuously failed to do.

Political ecologists often derive evidence for a holistic description
of the universe from developments in physics during the twentieth