Characterizing green political thought

The question as to whether green political thought represents a distinctive political ideology, worthy of a place in the pantheon of political ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and so on, is a matter of ongoing debate. Part of this debate arises from disagreement over the precise contours of green political thought, and over the theoretical linkages between different ideas in the ensemble of green ideas. At least two reasons for this disagreement may be singled out.

First, green political thought has no clear beginning, no towering prophets, and no master discourse. There is no overarching theorist (such as a Karl Marx), and no influential philosophical touchstone such as The Wealth of Nations or Das Kapital. As a body of ideas, it has numerous antecedents in western thought that can be traced back to Greek and Christian sources, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romanticism, American transcendentalism, the emergence of the science of ecology, and to many nineteenth-century political philosophies that were critical of the dehumanizing and destructive effects of the industrial revolution—most notably utopian socialism and communal anarchism (see Part I). In its contemporary manifestation, green political thought is nothing if not eclectic, building a wide variety of philosophical links between radical ecological thought and a selection of critical political philosophies (e.g., feminism, democratic socialism, anarchism), indigenous traditions and Eastern and Western religions (e.g., Buddhism, Creation Spirituality)—to name just a few. This eclecticism is itself a sign that green political thought is still in the process of formation, providing support for the claim that it is not (yet) capable of standing alone as a political ideology.

Second, the term “green” is regularly used in a variety of different contexts to designate not only different ecological and political ideas, but also different agents or political “carriers” of those ideas. For example, the phrase “green movement” is sometimes used to describe (i) simply the ecology or environment movement, or (ii) a new progressive political grouping of new social movements (typically the ecology, peace, women’s, social justice, overseas aid, and indigenous rights movements), with the ecology movement playing a pivotal role in providing an overarching theoretical matrix for the “new politics,” thereby giving a special primacy to ecological concerns. While the second designation is the more common manifestation of green party politics, the question as to which is “correct” can only be answered in the specific context of different states, regions, jurisdictions, and communities. For example, the political opportunity structure in particular states and regions (which includes whether the electoral system favors the emergence of minority parties and the extent to which existing political parties have absorbed environmental concerns) may militate against the formation of a new green party or coalition of parties, in which case particular segments of the environment movement or indeed other radical political alliances may take on the burden of defending the broader green agenda by other means.

Despite the significant eclecticism in green ideas, and the different political manifestations of those ideas, it is nonetheless possible to identify and draw together a cluster of core features of green political thought, based on a generic encapsulation of the main recurring features of the existing political platforms and programs of green parties, and green political movements in general. Whether these features ultimately serve to define green political thought as a new political ideology remains a moot point, as we shall see below. For the moment we are concerned to provide a general delineation of green political thought so that we may then position it against other political traditions in general, and liberalism in particular. The core features comprise:

- a concern and preoccupation with the ecological crisis;
- an ethic of respect for the ecological integrity of the earth and its myriad species;
- a relational ontology—i.e., an acknowledgment of social and ecological interdependence (see DEEP ECOLOGY);
- acceptance of the idea that there are ecological limits to growth;
- a corresponding support for an ecologically sustainable society which respects ecological limits;
- political support for radical social, technological, and economic changes to achieve an ecologically sustainable society;
- intergenerational and intragenerational equity (see FUTURE GENERATIONS);
- a commitment to participatory democracy and the decentralization of power to the lowest practical level.

While the broad green political agenda goes well beyond environmental protection, it is the overarching preoccupation with the ecological crisis and the quest to achieve an ecologically sustainable world which arguably gives green political thought its distinctive character vis-à-vis other political philosophies. To be sure, the goal of sustainability has now been embraced by the United Nations and political parties and organizations of many hues. However, the green movement and green parties can rightly claim to have been the initiators and political champions of the more radical, cutting edge of this popular (and rather flexible) concept. Of course, the meaning of sustainability remains contested within green circles, just as it remains amenable to different interpretations in broader political discourse. Nonetheless, the green debate on sustainability tends to take place in much more challenging terms than the mainstream political debate in addressing the fundamental questions as to what is to be sustained, for whom, and how. In response to these questions, greens overwhelmingly favor an ecological rather than economic understanding of sustainability.

From an ecology-centered (or ecocentric) perspective, the fundamental thing to be sustained is the ecological integrity of the earth and the flourishing of its myriad
species. This is a basic ethic of green political thought. The most distinctive aspect of this green normative argument is that it is not enough to look after nature simply because it looks after us (although this prudential argument is an important reason in and of itself). Rather, we should look after nature for its own sake, because it has its own inherent value, dignity, and/or beauty. According to this argument, a purely instrumental posture toward other beings and communities—whether human or non-human—may not only give rise to unwelcome and unforeseen ecological and social repercussions, but is also morally repugnant insofar as it diminishes the moral standing of both people and non-human nature (see META-ETHICS and NORMATIVE ETHICS).

The green ethic of respect for the earth is intimately connected with an ontology which acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life. According to this understanding of the world, not only are we all constituted by our biological and social relations but also everything we do has social and ecological repercussions. This ontology supports the practical green ethic of acting in the world with both empathy and caution (Eckersley 1992, p. 28), that is, a greater sense of concern for others and a keener appreciation that our activities generate consequences for others (both human and non-human). The green ontology and ethic together give rise to a cautious approach to risk assessment, including environmental and technology impact assessment, and a rejection of the Permeation notion that we are capable of fully controlling all our interventions in the natural world. It is frequently pointed out that ecosystems behave in unpredictable ways and may even be more complex than we can ever know.

The green call for an ecologically sustainable society flows from the related argument that there are ecological limits to growth. The view that we should respect ecological limits to economic and population growth rests on the idea that the earth has a limited ecological carrying capacity. (That this should be a matter of concern flows from the core green ethic of respecting and protecting the ecological integrity and biological diversity of the earth.) Infringement of those limits gives rise to ecological problems such as pollution build-up, loss of natural resources, reduction of biodiversity which can have potentially dire consequences for both human and non-human life by jeopardizing both well-being and survival. Indeed, it was the so-called “limits to growth” debate of the early 1970s which prompted the formation of the world’s first green parties (in Australia in the island state of Tasmania in 1972, New Zealand in 1972, and in Britain in 1973, in response to the publication of A Blueprint for Survival 1972). While the key publication of this period—The Limits to Growth (Meadows et al. 1972)—has been shown to be flawed, and while the idea of fixed “natural limits” has given way to a more flexible idea of ecological limits as thresholds that are determined not just by crude numbers of people or the amount of energy and resources consumed but also by social organization, culture, and available technology, the basic idea of ecological limits to growth has endured.

The political and economic implications of moving toward an ecologically sustainable world are potentially far-reaching. Strictly applied, ecological sustainability requires that natural resources must not be used beyond their regenerative capacity, waste production must not exceed the absorption capacity of ecosystems or otherwise threaten or compromise biological diversity and ecosystem integrity, and human population must not exceed the carrying capacity of ecosystems (this latter requirement remains a matter of some contention within and beyond green circles). Moving toward this goal requires changes in social and legal relations, technology, energy and resource use, modes of production, consumption patterns, patterns of human settlement and movement, and lifestyles generally. In the early days of the movement (notably in the early 1970s), the “limits to growth” analysis provided a basis for the green critique of economic growth and gave rise to calls for “zero growth” or steady-state growth. Nowadays, the critique is more typically couched in terms of a critique of indiscriminate economic growth and a concomitant call for qualitative, or ecologically sustainable growth, measured in terms of a meaningful quality of life index rather than in terms of indiscriminate Gross National Product figures (which is the measure usually relied upon by politicians to measure their nation’s progress).

Despite the ideological differences within the green movement, it is generally agreed that both unbridled capitalism and centrally planned state socialism cannot deliver the democratic control of social and economic life that is required if genuine sustainability is to be achieved. Moreover, the green critique of economic growth has exposed western capitalism and Soviet-style communism as essentially two different versions of the same “super-ideology” of industrialization (Douglas 1995, p. 33), despite their important differences about the respective roles of the market and the state. The green critique of industrialism is part of a broader re-examination of taken-for-granted ideas about the virtues of progress (understood in technological, economic, and material terms) inherited from the Enlightenment. Both liberalism and orthodox Marxism developed on economistic premises. They assumed that unbridled economic growth was both possible and desirable. They were also optimistic about the benefits of science and technology, and either explicitly or implicitly accepted the idea of the human manipulation and domination of nature for human advancement. By critically calling into question humanity’s relationship with nature, the green movement has sought to widen the political debate about who controls and receives the benefits of the “economic pie” (who gets what, when, and how) to include who bears the ecological costs associated with its production. This widening of the debate has not eclipsed the politics of “left versus right” (although some greens ingeniously claim that green politics is “beyond left and right”), but it has certainly placed it in a broader and more challenging context. Hillier, both liberals and orthodox socialists have assumed that freedom could be sought and found in material plenty, in new labour-saving technologies, and a rising stock of manufactured wealth. The alternative green argument is a sobering one: as we approach ecological limits to growth, we are likely to meet a growing gap between rich and poor, the undermining of life-support services, and a diminishment in the overall quality of life for everyone.

While the ecological crisis has served as the primary rallying point for the green movement and green theorists, most self-styled green politicians, party activists, and green political theorists are concerned with a much broader political agenda than simply environmental protection. That is, allowing that ecological crisis may be seen as the raison d’être of the green movement, its concerns range well beyond those of single-issue environment campaigns. Included in this broader agenda are the political goals of achieving greater social and environmental equity (including a more equitable distribution of environmental “goods” and “bads”), a “greening” of the
economy, greater democratic control of social and economic life, greater decentralization of political power, and a greater focus on the qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of individual and community development. For example, most green parties have organized around a broad, shared platform, originally developed by the German Green party, based upon the so-called “four pillars” of green politics: ecology, social responsibility (or environmental justice), grassroots democracy, and non-violence. Many new parties have added to this list, but the core principles have served as an important touchstone in the development of green political theory and practice throughout the world.

While the principle of “social responsibility” or environmental justice may not appear at first blush to necessarily flow from a strict, ecological understanding of sustainability, green political theorists and activists have nonetheless pointed out how justice and sustainability are inextricably linked together in a number of important ways. Indeed, the notion of intergenerational equity has always been central to the sustainability debates, both within and beyond the green movement. That is, the very idea that we should maintain a healthy environment over time presupposes some future class of beneficiaries who will inherit that healthy environment. At the very minimum, those beneficiaries will be future generations of people, although we have seen that an ecocentric ethic is concerned to extend the class of beneficiaries to include non-human species as well. However, this does not require present generations to sacrifice all of their needs in order to provide for the future – this would be self-defeating. Rather, it requires that present generations meet their needs in a way which enables future generations meet their own needs. This is the now classic formula for sustainable development defended by the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987). However, green political theorists argue that if the needs of the present generation are to be met in a sustainable manner, then intergenerational equity is also essential. This entails, at the very minimum, the notion of an equal entitlement of all people to the basic necessities of life, along with the idea that the rich should not pass on their ecological costs to the poor or consume more than their fair share. This argument is an especially important feature of the green intervention in the international development debates, particularly in relation to the problem of uneven development between the developed and the developing countries.

While each of the different sub-schools of green political thought have their own particular spin on this complex debate, it is possible to identify three interrelated propositions running through all of the green literature. The first is that ecological sustainability and environmental justice are interdependent phenomena and therefore cannot be dealt with in isolation but rather must be addressed simultaneously. The second is that both extreme wealth and extreme poverty are implicated in environmental destruction (albeit in very different ways), either because of “over-consumption” of resources on the part of the rich (relative to the poor) or because of a lack of alternative options (due to lack of means, education and/or power) on the part of the poor. The third is that the satisfaction of basic human needs and the avoidance of extreme wealth differentials within and between nations are required for both ecological sustainability and environmental justice. Indeed, it is frequently argued that the most radical changes must occur in the affluent societies, and that the rich countries should scale down and adjust their patterns of consumption and waste production to levels that can be reasonably sustained by all the peoples of the world. A related argument flowing from these insights is that the rich countries should not only set an example to the rest of the world (because they have the means to do so), but must also assist the less-developed countries to move toward sustainability through debt relief, technology transfer, various forms of aid, and more equitable trading relations. All of these arguments have played a key role in the international sustainable development debates, most notably in the recent round of negotiations on climate change.

Many contemporary green theorists (particularly ecofeminists, but also ecoculturalists and other environmental justice theorists) have pointed to many of the conceptual (as well as practical) links between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women and other marginalized social groups. That is, environmental destruction is less often a matter of the domination of nature by a blanket “humanity” and more often the upshot of the domination of some humans (the poor and/or disenfranchised) by others (the more economically powerful) in relation to development projects which serve the privileged few at the expense of the many. According to this analysis, ecologically sustainable development requires much greater democratic control over development decisions. Moreover, associating certain groups (e.g., women, indigenous peoples) with a devalued nature serves to legitimate their exploitation. In particular, less powerful social groups or cultures are sometimes devalued and marginalized because they are deemed to lack something that is possessed by the dominant group or culture to be the measure of human worth (such as reason, “civilization,” Christianity). In this marginalization process, women or indigenous cultures have historically been placed on the lower rungs of a hierarchy of being (i.e. typically God, Man, Women/Heathen, Nature) and therefore seen to be less human, less worthy, and “closer to nature” than those privileged groups which possess power to define worthiness. According to this green critique, avoiding such invidious and self-serving comparisons requires the cultural celebration of ecological and cultural diversity (see ecofeminism) along with a rejection of any notion of a hierarchy of being (within both human society and within the biological world).

From the beginning, the green movement and new green parties sought to stand for not only new values and new issues – and new issues linkages – but also a new style of politics, manifested in more participatory and decentralized organizational structures. From the point of view of most greens, questions of political analysis, values, and goals cannot be separated from the question of political means. Accordingly, greens have placed considerable emphasis on the importance of maintaining consistency between ends and means. For example, the green support for a democratic and non-violent society requires that they must necessarily rule out the use of undemocratic and/or violent means to achieve their goals.

Although participatory democracy and decentralization have been defended as basic principles of green politics, many critics have questioned whether either of these means of social organization is necessarily connected with, or conducive to, ecological sustainability. For example, there is a controversial strain of eco-authoritarian literature within the broader eco-political literature (e.g., Helbing 1974; Ophuls 1977), which maintains that perhaps only an authoritarian government is capable of ushering in the sorts of radical changes that are required to place society on
an ecologically sustainable footing. Other critics have suggested that a sustainable society may be just as easily attained by a fascist government as a democratic one, or that ecological ideals lend themselves to fascist politics insofar as they celebrate the “blood and soil” of particular “home-grown” communities. In rejecting these claims on moral grounds, green political theorists have also argued that the weight of evidence suggests that eco-fascist and eco-authoritarian regimes are much less capable of achieving lasting ecological sustainability than democratic governments. This is because the success of ecologically sustainable development policies is dependent on an informed citizenry which understands and supports the need for such policies, and freely cooperates with a government which the majority accepts as legitimate. This presupposes at the very least a free flow of information between government and citizenry, along with other basic civil and political rights. In advancing the case for democracy, green theorists (such as Pascale 1988 and Pukin 1991) have shown how the argument of the green movement has worked in reverse: that the flourishing of the environmental movement and the broader green movement has served to extend and deepen democracy in both the East and the West. At the very least, then, the green case for democracy has been defended as not merely an incidental or desirable “add-on” to the green case but rather an essential requirement to the achievement of green goals.

Indeed, green theorists have generally been critical of “actually existing” liberal democracy as “too thin” and incomplete to enable the type of informed, discursive dialogue that is considered necessary to protect public goods such as the environment. According to this argument, the partisan, competitive bargaining that is characteristic of liberal democratic dialogue usually enables the more powerful, well-resourced and better organized private sector interests to prevail over the weaker, countervailing power of the public interest. If green goals are to be achieved, what is needed are more participatory or deliberative forms of dialogue which enable a free and rational evaluation of common or generalizable interests, where decisions are reached by the force of the better argument rather than on the basis of a truncated, politically managed, and lopsided debate which generally favors the interests of the powerful (Dryzek 1987).

The green case for decentralization is linked to the case for participatory democracy, but it is also defended on separate social and ecological grounds. Indeed, the popular green slogans “small is beautiful” and “think globally, act locally” seek to encapsulate an interconnected set of green arguments concerning the importance of human-scaled institutions, democratic self-management and local ecological responsibility. Together, these ideas are often presented as the “third way,” that is, an alternative to the hierarchical and exploitative institutions of Western capitalist democracy and state socialism. In terms of the link with participatory democracy, it is typically argued that smaller, human-scaled institutions and communities are more conducive to face-to-face, participatory democracy than mass consumer societies. From a social perspective, local communities are more likely to engender a sense of belonging, and a corresponding sense of personal responsibility for the fate of community and its environment. From an ecological perspective, the ideal is that local communities live within the means of their local ecosystems so that energy and transport costs would be reduced, natural resources would be utilized sustainably, wastes would be recycled, and there would be no externalization of ecological costs onto other communities and regions. One distinctive offshoot of this green perspective is bioregionalism, an essentially eco-anarchist strand of green political thought which maintains that political boundaries should be determined according to ecological criteria (such as watershed boundaries) rather than on the basis of arbitrary political or historical factors. Local communities living within particular bioregions should form a loose confederal government with their bioregional neighbors. Moreover, each local community would practice “rehabilitation,” or learning to live-in-place, which entails cultivating a detailed knowledge of the local ecosystem, respecting its processes, and repairing any damage from past exploitation (Berg and Dasmann 1978, pp. 217–18).

While the green defense of decentralization has much to commend it, not least from an environmental educational perspective, many variants of this argument have nonetheless come under heavy criticism and are often contradicted by the day-to-day lobbying and policies promoted by some of the more cosmopolitan manifestations of the environmental movement and broader green movement. Part of this apparent contradiction stems from ambiguity in the core term “decentralization.” In particular, it is not always clear exactly what ought to be decentralized (political power, economic power, environmental management, or all of the foregoing) and what this might mean for the nation-state. Eco-anarchists (many of whom are also bioregionalists) tend to defend decentralization in all of these terms, and either reject or seek to bypass the nation-state. Environmentalists, on the other hand, accept the principle of democratic self-management in terms of worker democracy, and local government and community planning, but also strongly defend the state as playing an essential role in raising and spending revenue at the national level to maintain basic standards across different regions within the country (whether in terms of welfare, education or environmental quality) (Frankel 1987).

One of the problems with the green case for decentralization is that it is typically advanced in optimistic and visionary terms, and does not adequately grapple with the realities of economic and political power in an increasingly interdependent world. Doubtless, if every local community were relatively stable, democratically organized, and socially homogeneous enough to share the kind of ecological consciousness required to practice bioregional living, then there would no longer be an ecological crisis. However, simply ceding political and economic control (including environmental management powers) to existing local communities does not in itself provide any guarantees that these communities will exercise their powers in an ecologically responsible manner. Indeed, many development conflicts have seen local and national environmental organizations lobby national or indeed international institutions in an effort to override the development decisions of local elites. Moreover, the more extreme case for local autonomy or local self-sufficiency defended by some eco-anarchists cannot be reconciled with the green ontology of interdependence and the broader cosmopolitan goals of global ecological integrity and environmental justice. The case for autonomy naïvely fails to acknowledge that not all regions are equally endowed with the conditions for human flourishing (in terms of climate, natural resources, and appropriate technologies), and that resource transfers between communities are essential if environmental justice and sustainability are to be
maintained. In light of this realization, greens more typically defend the concept of “self-reliance” rather than self-sufficiency in the development debates. The former concept accepts trade and resource transfers between regions, but insists that such exchanges be democratically managed to avoid the subjugation of local people and their environment to the external dictates of the market.

**Green political thought: a distinctive political ideology?**

Now it might be generally argued that while the green movement does constitute a new political force in contemporary politics, which challenges so-called conventional political parties, there is nonetheless nothing **politically** distinctive about green political thought in terms of the history of political ideas, since it merely represents a critical ecological reinterpretation and reworking of a select range of otherwise familiar political themes and strategies (such as the critique of capitalism, patriarchy, bureaucratic domination, and instrumental reason, the dehumanizing effects of certain technologies, and support for participatory democracy and decentralization). According to this argument, green theorists must admit to having borrowed these various political themes and arguments from other political traditions.

It might be further argued that many existing political traditions (ranging from left to right) are capable of incorporating ecological ideas, including the notion of sustainability, into their political analyses and agendas. Proponents of this view might point to the emergence of a range of new eco-political hybrids such as eco-anarchism, eco-Marxism, eco-socialism, eco-feminism, and “free market environmentalism,” all of which take on board ecological problems, and support various versions of sustainability. According to this argument, it is possible to point to an environmental wing in virtually all of the existing political traditions, but none of these wings can be said to constitute a new political ideology, capable of standing alone in the line-up of political traditions. Rather, each must be seen as merely a further accretion to, or development of, existing political traditions.

In response, it might be argued that novelty can be found in hybridization, and that although some of the political elements in the green mix may be familiar, their reworking and re-arrangement into a new, ecologically oriented constellation of ideas serves to transform their ideological character and potential political impact. According to this view, green political thought does represent a distinctive political ideology, despite the fact that many of its branches may have strong affinities with some well-established traditions of political philosophy (such as anarchism, democratic socialism, and feminism) and arguably weak or negligible affinities with others (such as orthodox Marxism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism). Political philosophies are distinguishable by, among other things, the core problems they identify and the core values they defend in response to those problems. If liberalism’s core values — liberty and respect for the individual person — arose from its preoccupation with the problem of tyranny, then green political philosophy’s core values — ecological sustainability and respect for nature — have arisen in response to the ecological crisis.

Andrew Dobson (1995) has called the political philosophy of the green movement “ecocentrism” to distinguish it from environmentalism, which he characterizes as a reformist and largely managerial response to the environmental crisis which does not fundamentally challenge dominant values and current patterns of production and consumption. Unlike reformist environmentalism, ecocentrism “holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human world, and in our mode of social and political life” (1995, p. 1). Dobson goes on to define ecocentrism as a distinctive political ideology. It is an ideology because it encompasses an analytical description of society (which includes an explanation of the ecological crisis and associated social ills), a vision of an alternative society and an associated program of political action. And it is distinctive because ecocentrism cannot be hybridized with any political ideology in the way that environmentalism can. That is, ecocentrism is philosophically at odds with some political ideologies and sympathetic with (but not identical to) others.

Dobson’s characterization of ecocentrism does not command universal agreement within green circles. It has nonetheless served as an influential benchmark in the ongoing debate about the characterisation of green political thought. It is consistent with the more common manifestation of the green movement identified above (that of a political alliance of new social movements, organized under the unifying banner of ecology). It is also consistent with the broad bipartite distinction in the environmental philosophy literature between anthropocentric versus non-anthropocentric, or ecocentric versus technocentric (O’Riordan 1981) approaches to understanding and addressing the ecological crisis, while also going to greater lengths to draw out and articulate the explicit social and political dimension of the radical end of this spectrum. For Dobson, then, ecocentrism serves as a core value of ecocentrism (1995, p. 5).

From an analytical perspective, Dobson’s characterization makes the task of distinguishing green political thought from other political traditions quite straightforward. That is, if one supports an ecocentric perspective then one would also be expected to subscribe to the idea of ecological interdependence, limits to growth, and support radical moves toward an ecologically sustainable society, all of which are encapsulated in his rendering of ecocentrism. In this sense, ecocentrism serves not only as the moral bedrock of green political thought but also as the value which most distinguishes green political thought from other political ideologies, all of which place people, the community, the social collectivity or “the person”, rather than nature writ large (comprising both the human and non-human worlds), at the center of their respective moral and political universes.

Nonetheless, against Dobson, it might be argued that while it may be the case that ecocentrism is perhaps the most distinctive and philosophically radical aspect of green political thought, to insist that this serve as the defining feature may be to define green political thought in unduly circumscribed terms. An alternative and more ecumenical approach to characterizing green political thought might be to understand eco-centricism as representing the philosophically radical wing of green political thought, without serving as the defining feature. That is, it might be argued that the defining feature of green political thought is support for the idea that human societies should respect ecological limits by practicing ecologically sustainable living. On this broader and more catholic view, green political thought may be said to rest on the
general norm that we should respect and protect the ecological integrity of the earth and its myriad organisms, but this norm may be supported by anthropocentric and/or ecocentric ethical arguments, or for spiritual or aesthetic reasons. In other words, people may divide in the reasons they give for supporting "strong sustainability" (with "light greens" supporting anthropocentric and prudential arguments and "dark greens" calling intrinsic value arguments as well, and with different cultures in the North and the South drawing on their own philosophical and religious traditions) but it is the support for strong sustainability which makes them green, not their particular philosophical or religious leanings. Many theorists have defended this interpretation as the most politically desirable one insofar as it avoids unnecessary and divisive eco-philosophical hair-splitting and is likely to win the broadest number of political supporters.

While these arguments might be granted, it can nonetheless be noted that the more ecumenical characterization also potentially threatens the unique identity of green political thought, reducing it to a broad arena of environmental debate around recurrent themes, issues, values, and strategies concerning sustainability, rather than a tight and analytically coherent body of political ideas that is distinguishable from other political philosophies. Indeed, the broader and more popular the green political agenda is defined, the more likely it is to be co-opted by other liberal political movements and parties, thereby stripping green political thought of any remaining identity. Such a development would give weight to the argument advanced earlier, that green political theory cannot stand alone, and that each branch of green political thought, such as eco-socialism, ecofeminism, and eco-anarchism, must be seen as further developments of socialism, feminism, and anarchism respectively, rather than sub-schools of green political thought.

Yet there is no reason why each of these sub-branches cannot be seen as part of an ongoing dialogue within both traditional political theory and green political theory circles. Green politics began as "a practice in search of a theory" (Eckersley 1988) and we have already noted the eclecticism of green political thought, and the fact that it does not (yet) have a settled identity. However, the fact that green political thought cannot boast a clear and distinct philosophical lineage, a united voice, and a settled identity should not alone disqualify it as a distinct political philosophy. It is, after all, not appreciably different from other political philosophies, such as anarchism, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and feminism, all of which have uneven intellectual histories, inconsistencies, overlaps with other traditions, internal differences and conflicts. Yet all of these bodies of political thought are still recognized as more or less distinctive "families" or political traditions. That liberalism may be seen to comprise a right wing and a left wing does not mean that the left wing properly belongs to the family of socialist thought, rather than a branch of liberal thought. Provided the more left-leaning variant otherwise possesses the family resemblances of liberalism, then it may be considered part of the liberal family. By parity of reasoning, so long as any socialist, anarchist, or feminist variant of green political thought otherwise possesses the family resemblances of green political thought (i.e. the core features identified above), then it may be classified as properly belonging to green political thought - irrespective of what else it might be classified under.

Green political thought and liberalism

One way of bringing green political thought into sharper relief is to set it against one of the more influential and enduring of the western political traditions, namely, liberalism. We have already noted that green political thought does not have an especially close affinity with liberalism. However, this incompatibility does not extend equally to every feature and/or sub-school of the broad and diverse family of liberal thought. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge those parts of liberalism which are accepted by greens as having enduring value. These include the basic idea that government power should not be absolute or arbitrary but rather must be limited and exercised according to law; that government should take place with the consent of the governed; that basic civil and political rights be upheld; that each person should enjoy equal political liberty (a basic requirement of democracy); and that support be given to the principle of toleration and respect for diversity. All of these liberal ideas are essentially assumed and carried forward by green political theorists. Indeed, some nineteenth-century liberal theorists (notably J. S. Mill and T. H. Green) are arguably proto-green theorists in their support for the flourishing of individual and biological diversity and/or their support for a stationery state economy.

What has come under critical scrutiny by green theorists, however, is the meaning and context of the basic liberal value of freedom of the individual, and the associated liberal ideas of property rights and market freedom. It is important to emphasize that this critique is largely an immanent critique. That is, green theorists do not reject the idea of freedom of the individual, nor the related idea of the equal inherent value and dignity of each and every individual. Rather, they seek to recontextualize freedom in a new ecological and social context by arguing that human freedom should not be purchased at the expense of ecosystem integrity, biological diversity, or social justice. Building upon and extending the socialist, feminist, and communitarian critiques of liberal freedom, green political theorists have rejected the atomistic ontology of liberal theory, and the related liberal conception of the person as a free (i.e., isolated, asocial, unencumbered) agent making rational choices in the world, as if there were no social ties or responsibilities. They have also joined socialist, feminist, and communitarian critics of liberalism in pointing out that the liberal notion of freedom is unearnable for everyone and undesirable in the form in which it has been theorized, because it is based upon a denial of social interdependence and a selfish or egoistic conception of the individual. This is especially marked in the libertarian conception of freedom as "negative liberty," which is understood as the right to be unencumbered by external restraint of any kind. According to this libertarian model, the state is a necessary evil and any restraints imposed upon the individual should be kept to an absolute minimum. Helping others is a matter of individual charity, not individual or social responsibility.

It is frequently pointed out that liberal values were born in a frontier setting, which assumed an expanding resource base and a continually rising stock of wealth. We have already noted that liberalism, along with its great rival Marxism, fully absorbed the Enlightenment idea of progress, assuming that scientific progress and the technological domination of nature would provide plenty for all. (For example, John
Locke's (1632-1704) quaint defense of private property, outlined in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, argued that property rights grew out of individuals mixing their labor with nature — in a world where it was conveniently assumed that there was plenty of unappropriated land and no one around to object (see Early Modern Philosophy). Green political theorists, as we have seen, have argued that as we approach limits to growth, the realization of freedom in liberal terms becomes untenable for the majority of people, and sometimes even for the very rich, who cannot insulate themselves from global problems such as climate change. Instead, we are likely to witness an increasing gap between rich and poor, growing social unrest, and an escalating ecological crisis. Drawing on the arguments of ecological economists, green political theorists generally maintain that if we are to move toward an ecologically sustainable society, then macro-limits (set by the local community, the state, and the international community) on market freedom are essential (see Economics). Left to its own devices, the economic rationality of the market actor (especially the abstract entity known as the corporation) is one that knows no ecological limits or social bonds. Its primary concerns are economic efficiency, growth, and profit maximization, not social justice or sustainability. From the perspective of market actors, it is more rational to privatize gains and socialize costs. From an ecological and social perspective, however, it is more “rational” to cultivate ecological citizenship and, if necessary, impose legal sanctions to protect public goods such as the environment by laying down sustainability parameters to ensure that economic activity does not encroach upon ecosystem integrity or biodiversity. While green political theorists acknowledge the proactive role that green consumers might play in greening the market, the important task of laying down sustainability parameters is one that should primarily belong to people acting publicly and democratically as citizens, not privately and individually as consumers (Jacobs 1991). Not surprisingly, green political theorists are generally skeptical of new eco-libertarian ideas such as “free market environmentalism,” which assert that the solution to the “tragedy of the commons” is the privatization of the commons. Any management regime which seeks to relinquish public control of environmental quality can no longer provide for democratic dialogue over environmental management or provide any security against private interests prevailing over the public interest in environmental protection. We have also seen that green theorists have generally been critical of “actually existing” liberal democracy as “too thin” and incomplete to enable the type of informed, deliberative, and public-spirited dialogue that is necessary to develop strategies for ecologically sustainable development.

To the extent that a green model of freedom is discernible, it has much in common with socialist, communitarian, and republican interpretations, which posit individual freedom not as something that exists prior to civil society or the state (which can then be encroached upon by society or the state), but rather something that is constituted by social relations and the state. On this understanding, ecological freedom for all can only be fully realized in a social setting which enables and, where necessary, enforces ecological responsibility. Ultimately, as we have seen, this requires that the rich should scale down their resource consumption to a level that is compatible with global justice, while also providing the necessary resource transfers to the poor to ensure that ecological sustainability can be achieved on a worldwide scale.

In light of the foregoing analysis, there is room to conclude that green political thought represents simultaneously a new environmental ethic, a new political ideology, and a new meta-ideology, signaling a broad cultural shift beyond humanism.

References

Borg, P. and Dasmann, R. F. (1978) "Reinhabiting California," *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California* ed. Peter Berg (San Francisco: Planet Drum Foundation). [This article, and the broader anthology in which it appears, is one of the foundational texts on bioregionalism.]


Further reading

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Law
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The codification of environmental law around the world during the last three decades of the twentieth century can justly be seen as an achievement of humankind’s enhanced capacity to reflect upon its place in nature. With this body of legislation, the governments of virtually all the nations of the earth announced their intention to safeguard the environment through systematic regulatory action, and to subordinate the desires and appetites of their citizens to the needs of other species and biological systems on the planet. Yet, the development of environmental law over a generation ran counter to many conventional assumptions about learning and progress (Andrews 1999; Vig and Kraft 2000). Increasing scientific knowledge about the environment did not, in all cases, bring more clarity or certainty about what the law should seek to accomplish. A legislative process that began in the late 1960s with fairly straightforward attempts to regulate the harmful consequences of industrial activity found itself considerably less sure by the late 1990s about the ends as well as the means of policy. Environmental impacts displayed an unsuspected fluidity, crossing media as well as geopolitical boundaries in ways that confounded state-centered regulatory action. Policy instruments, such as risk assessment, that were once thought to be largely technical gradually revealed themselves as irreducibly political. Arguments among experts precluded consensus-based action on significant environmental problems and helped shift power from state agencies to less predictable and less publicly accountable nongovernmental organizations. Throughout the period, moreover, there was a sense of impending crisis, as people recognized that failing to protect the environment might have consequences more dire than once imagined – that the stakes were no less than the sustainability of meaningful human life on a threatened and resource-constrained planet.

The progressive dimension of environmental law consists, then, not in its increasing control over well-defined hazards, but in its capacity to adapt to growing knowledge of the limits of prediction and management (Paikhe 1989). Contemporary environmental law began, as noted, with a fundamental commitment to preventing harm rather than merely mitigating damage that had already occurred. But prevention seemed very often to require a leap of faith, as governments had to choose between competing probabilistic scenarios on the basis of inadequate knowledge. Among the shifts in understanding that complicated the law’s development, the following were especially significant: recognition of long-term, cross-media, cross-species, and transboundary effects; awareness of inextricable links between human development and environmental quality; sensitivity to the complexity of