Reassessing Ecology and Political Theory

MATHEW HUMPHREY

The ‘reassessment’ referred to in the subtitle of this edited special edition of *Environmental Politics* refers, crucially, to a rethinking *from within*. The most important project currently under way in environmental political philosophy is the reconstruction of a positive environmental agenda which is cognisant of the various critiques of green political thought that have been articulated since the ‘first wave’ of green literature in the 1960s and 70s. The context of, and justification for, this edited collection is best provided by a brief intellectual history.

From the 1960s, green political thought (and environmentally inclined political thought more generally) has had its own developmental history. To say that there have been ‘three waves’ of literature is inevitably to simplify considerably, but this characterisation also captures an important truth. If we take Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as a fairly conventional starting point, we see a ‘first wave’ of literature that sought to alert a readership to a new set of environmental problems. This literature was distinguished from earlier writing on environmental themes in that these problems were taken to be structurally, rather than contingently, attached to conventional models of economic and technological development. They were also taken to be global in scope, and to imply absolute limits to the possibilities of economic development around the world [Carson, 1965; Daly, 1973; Ehrlich, 1968; Goldsmith, 1972, Meadows et al., 1974]. An important political corollary to this view, which developed as various writers tried to think through the implications of environmental degradation, was a sense of pessimism about the possibility of maintaining the liberal-democratic form of government in the light of these apparent ecological problems. A world in which people were free to choose modes of behaviour according to an understanding of their self-interest would inevitably conflict with the kind of ecological outcomes that were valued in this literature. The solution lay at the very least in ‘mutual coercion mutually agreed upon’, and possibly upon a coercive global government dedicated to ecological ends, and with the power to overcome the ‘tragedy of the commons’. [Hardin, 1968; Heilbroner, 1974; Ophuls, 1977].

This ‘eco-doomsday’ scenario of the 1960s and early 1970s produced a predictable backlash, from a variety of sources. Mainstream economists...
maintained that the forecasts of resource depletion, maximum capacity sink-
resource use, and the ecological stresses caused by human population
growth in environmental literature were massively over-pessimistic
(famously, Julian Simon won a bet with Paul Ehrlich over the future prices
of a set of primary resources) [Beckerman, 1974; Simon and Kahn, 1984].
Socialists claimed that ecologists had overlooked the crucial question of
resource distribution and social justice in their critiques of industrial society,
and that the more correct target was still capitalism [Ensensberger, 1974;
Pepper, 1993; Weston, 1982]. Meanwhile libertarians stressed the
apparently authoritarian implications of the political measures advocated by
environmentalists [McHallam, 1991].

It is clear that at least some of these critiques hit their target. However,
rather than forcing an abandonment of the political-ecological project, they
have instead led to a critical revision of green political thought on the part of
both scholars and activists who share ecological concerns. The ‘first wave’
of literature alerted the public to a problem, and has placed
environmentalism on the political map - permanently. The ‘second’, critical
wave of literature provided the impetus to a needed rethinking of the position
that ecologists and environmentalists wanted to adopt. Now a ‘third’ wave of
literature has emerged, which again places environmental concerns at its
core, but in a more reflective, nuanced, and critically aware manner than its
first wave predecessor. (As I say, my account simplifies; I would not disagree
with Dobson’s contention that the critical literature has also become more
sophisticated [Dobson, 1995: 204].) I would cite as exemplary in this regard
the recent books by John Barry [1999], Andrew Dobson [1998] and Tim
Hayward [1998]. The epistemological, ontological, economic and political
assumptions of the first wave of literature all now stand questioned within
the parameters of environmental political philosophy itself. This does not
mean, however, that what I have called the second wave critique has itself
been adopted uncritically – far from it, much of it stands rejected. What it has
catalysed, instead, is an immanent critique from environmental theorists of
their own concepts, ideas, and value commitments – and as a result these
theorists are in the process of developing a more satisfying account of
ecological political theory and philosophy.

This special issue of Environmental Politics seeks to carry this important
project forward by providing a forum for a number of analyses offering a
sympathetic, reconstructive critique of elements of existing environmental
political philosophy. This is what gives intellectual coherence to a collection
of essays that in toto survey a broad area of the ideational landscape.
The Contents of this Volume

The essays collected here fall, without an excessive amount of gerrymandering, into two broad categories of concern, which we might call ‘blind-spots’ on the one hand, and ‘errors in argument’ on the other. That is, the process of reconstructing political-ecological thought is held by the authors of this collection to require either

1) a ‘correction of vision’ on the part of green theorists such that particular areas, issues, or objectives come more clearly into view and are dealt with explicitly.

And/or

2) A ‘correction of argument’ in areas where green political theory is taken to have gone astray in its lines of reasoning, strategies, or failure to understand the implications of its own position.

On the question of ‘blindspots’, the first essay, from Andrew Light, seeks to shed light upon “the urban blindspot in environmental thought” in both environmental ethics and in political ecology. Light argues that, because most environmental ethicists (a paradigmatic example being a thinker such as Holmes Rolston III) tend to think of nature and culture as distinct spheres of ethical concern, and focus almost exclusively on the former, ‘non-natural’ environments are left lacking philosophical grounds for protection and are sometimes held up as examples of environmental disvalue. The picture in political ecology is more complex, as social ecology, in particular, has not ignored the urban environment. None the less in general an urban blindspot persists even here. Light offers us an argument to the effect that the anti-urban bias in environmental ethics and political ecology is counter-productive and needs to be overcome.

The second area in which environmental ethics is accused of suffering a blindspot is that of property theory. In particular, Breen’s contribution to this volume holds that whilst ecocentric theorists have been “vigorous in rejection of dominant western ideas of property” they have been surprisingly neglectful of the task of developing an alternative theory of property in accord with their own ethical position. Breen’s account attempts to inject some theoretical clarity into ecocentrism through an examination of its theoretical foundations. She then builds upon this an argument for an ecocentric theory of property based on a two-factor system of weighted interests.

The third contribution to the ‘blindspot’ section concerns ecofeminism, and what the author perceives as its failure to comprehend its own utopian aspirations and thus its own potential. Lucy Sargisson explores the
implications of a coming-together of feminism and ecologism. They have shared thematic preoccupations, including challenges to traditionally conceived notions of the public and the private, the nature of the political, and a concern to imagine alternative ways of being. Both are, on Sargisson's reading, therefore utopian movements. Ecofeminism has, however, to date failed to capitalise upon its own utopian possibilities. The meeting of feminism and ecologism on the terrain of utopia permits the creation of a 'new/no conceptual space' in which creative thinking can flourish.

Niraja Jayal's study on the need to balance political and ecological values would have fitted well in either section, as she argues both that environmental ethicists have tended to disregard particular human and environmental problems that exist in the Third World, and that the relationship between ecological values and (broadly liberal) political values has not been adequately theorised to date. Through the use of environmental conflict in India as a case study, Jayal demonstrates that it is in the third world that we most forcefully encounter the lack of a neat 'fit' between a story of environmental degradation on the one hand, and human interests on the other. This divergence results in forms of social domination. Ultimately there is a need to work human specificities into an anthropocentric environmental ethic, such that differences in human locations and human histories, class, and gender can all be accounted for when ecological and liberal political values conflict.

Turning from blindspots to cases where green theory is held to be in error on the grounds of using mistaken arguments, this section begins with a paper on intergenerational justice. Terry Ball examines some of the problems involved in thinking about the problem of intergenerational justice. Ball argues that the two dominant views – that future generations have no demands based in justice because of lack of recipriocity, and alternatively that we need a radically new discourse if we are to understand our obligations to future generations – are both deficient. Deficient because they presuppose an untenable view of the process of 'conceptual change'. Liberal-individualistic conceptions of justice and rights are not fixed and frozen, but open to challenge and contestation from within the discourse of liberal individualism. Ball introduces the notion of 'punctuated reciprocity' to show that we can speak meaningfully and coherently about our obligations to act justly towards posterity through the recognition of two well established liberal principles, life and liberty.

The analysis by Avner de-Shalit examines failures of environmental activism, and asks how we can theorise these in order to understand their causes more adequately. Such failures are frequently attributed to the structural problems environmentalists face within a particular political system. De-Shalit asks, in contrast, to what extent environmental activists are
themselves responsible for the failures of some environmental campaigns.

He finds that there are ten crucial decision areas where the wrong choices increase the likelihood of campaign failure. Unfortunately for environmental activists, these mistaken strategies are pursued all too frequently.

Finally, Mathew Humphrey examines the notion of ‘irreversibility’ as it has been used in environmental discourse. He suggests that there has been a rather easy assumption on the part of some ecological theorists that the possibility of undergoing ‘irreversible change’ is a property unique to natural objects, or at least a close-to-unique property. The possession of this property is then used to bolster arguments for preservation, sustainability and the retention of option-value. Whilst accepting that there is a common-sense understanding of irreversibility by which these claims are true and important, it is worth investigating the theoretical effects that follow from taking seriously the proposition, from the philosophy of science, that irreversibility is a ‘normal state of the universe’ and as such applicable to a far wider class of objects than environmental goods. An appreciation of this understanding of ‘strict irreversibility’ may change some of the ways in which we think about relevant considerations in environmental decision making.

Theorising environmental politics is an ongoing process. There is no ‘last word’, at least partly because environmental theory has to keep pace with the physical changes to the natural world that human beings are capable of bringing about. Environmental political philosophy, as it develops, is also becoming increasingly sensitised to the requirement that it must acknowledge other political values than environmental ones, particularly questions of distributive justice, democracy, and freedom. This makes for more difficult and complex theory building, but, as a consequence, it also makes for more satisfying theory. This volume will, we hope, contribute something to these developments.

REFERENCES

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