11 Green political perspectives at the dawn of the twenty-first century

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As a well-defined ideological current, the green perspective is comparatively new. For most of the twentieth century, variants of liberalism, socialism and conservatism (combined with admixtures of nationalism), and for a brief period fascism, occupied the centre of the political stage. Momentous developments of the last hundred years— including the world wars, the ending of the colonial era, the rise and fall of the Soviet experiment, the genesis of the welfare state, and the punctuated diffusion of democratic mechanisms— have been closely associated with conflict, but also with cross-fertilization and hybridization, among these major traditions. Compared with feminism, or even with such manifestations of late-twentieth-century ideological creativity as the new right, religious fundamentalisms and emergent nationalisms, the immediate impact of the greens may appear modest. Yet in the few decades of its existence the green perspective has made an initial mark, and it seems likely that it will assume a more significant role in the future.

The green perspective

Like other ideological trends, greens are characterized by diversity; and the green perspective is more a family of related approaches than a single integrated viewpoint. Contributions to this emergent tradition of political argument—which offers a biting critique of modern society, particularly with respect to the damage industrial civilization is inflicting upon the planetary ecosphere—have been made by environmental campaigners, anti-nuclear and animal-rights activists, political organizers and radical journalists, environmental philosophers and academic theoreticians. Ministers in the German coalition government, ‘monkey-wrenchers’ fighting to preserve the American wilderness, and advocates of alternative technologies and lifestyles can all claim to identify with the green political project. And ‘social ecology’, ‘eco-socialism’, ‘bio-regionalism’, ‘eco-feminism’, and ‘deep ecology’ are just some of the variants and hybrids associated with green politics. Yet despite the diversity, there are some things greens share.

At the heart of the green perspective lies a profound preoccupation with the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Pollution of air, water and land, the prodigal consumption of resources, the destruction of natural
habitats and wilderness, the decline of biodiversity and the dangers of climate change are routinely decried. But for greens environmental issues are not merely a series of discrete concerns that can be managed through specific remedial technologies. Rather they are symptomatic of fundamental flaws in contemporary civilization. They result from a value system which treats nature as material to be harnessed to human ambition, a world view which ignores the complex inter-dependence of ecological processes, an economic system addicted to expansion, waste, and inequality, and a political system manipulated by those who gain most from existing practices. What distinguishes this view from the perspective of others who worry about environmental destruction is that for greens the socio-ecological problematic provides the privileged terrain for defining political identity and orienting political action. In other words, the hills of contemporary society are such that the political division between those who advocate a radical break with current practices and those who defend the existing industrial order is paramount. Thus while greens (implicitly or explicitly) accept insights culled from established political perspectives, they affirm the need to build a distinctly 'green' political movement.

Four elements are typically present in green critiques of the ecological delinquency of contemporary society. First, there is an affirmation of the fundamental value of nature, natural processes, and the environment. According to greens industrial society devalues the natural world, neglects the extent to which humans are dependent on natural systems, and denies the independent worth of non-human natural entities. Yet nature provides the bounty on which human society depends — not only in material terms, but also in a aesthetic, psychological and spiritual sense. Moreover, nature should be understood as possessing a value that is independent of human purposes. Natural entities deserve respect and consideration, and should not be approached merely from the standpoint of their potential utility. Instrumental and non-instrumental reasons for valuing nature receive varying patterns of emphasis in different green approaches: some insist that recognition of intrinsic values in nature is the hallmark of true greens; others emphasize the importance of nature for human flourishing; while still others privilege the lived experience bond between humans and the non-human natural world. Among philosophically-inclined greens arguments about the sorts of natural entities that possess value, the relationship between moral agency and moral considerability, egalitarian or hierarchical approaches to ordering conflicting claims, and whether value exists independently of values, abound. But any perspective that can reasonably be called green draws on some of these elements, arguing that we must reassess the way we look at the natural world.

Second there is an idea of the reality of natural limits — that the ecosphere is finite, that physical and biological systems are bounded, and that a society which continuously expands (its economy, population, resource inputs, or waste outputs) will eventually come to grief. In a finite world, exponential growth cannot go on for ever. According to greens industrial societies are already transgressing these limits, consuming resources and dumping wastes at unsustainable rates. And if this profligate way of living were to be extended around the world, the strain upon the global ecosphere would prove intolerable. Although the predictions made in the early 1970s of imminent ecological collapse proved premature, the notion of natural limits remains a central theme of green argument. The exhaustion of renewable resource systems (the depletion of fish stocks, for example, the congestion of cities, roads and airways, the continuing destruction of natural habitats, and impending climate change — serve as icons for pervasive ecological limits. Ignoring such limits not only guarantees the continuing destruction of nature, but also spells potential disaster for human society.

Third, there is a repudiation of the overall development trajectory of contemporary industrial civilization. Greens argue that the pattern of development adopted by modern society is desperately wrong. Humans have built a civilization predicated upon the ongoing pillage of natural systems. Progress has been mistakenly identified with ceaseless growth, and the quest for material satisfactions. While greens differ over the diagnosis of the underlying causes of this malaise (Enlightenment thinking, hierarchy, capitalism and so on) and over the relative acceptability of specific technologies or patterns of economic and social activity, they all believe that society has taken a wrong turning. What is required to set this to rights is a radical re-orientation of social development towards a 'sustainable' society — one which lives in harmony with natural systems, imposes no burdens which the ecosphere cannot bear, and leaves ample place for the flourishing of non-human nature.

Finally, there is what may be described as the emancipatory impulse of the green vision. It is not just that natural limits ultimately will prevent us from continuing our profligate life-style, but also that the green alternative promises us a much better world than the one we know today. And this in two senses. On the one hand, in a green society the burden imposed upon the environment will be lessened dramatically: humans will once again 'walk lightly upon the earth'. Nature will, in a sense, be set free from humanity's ruthless quest for absolute dominion. And, on the other hand, the advent of a green society will also set humans free. Relieved of the pressures of commercial civilization, we will enjoy lives that are happier and healthier, that are more meaningful, and that are more closely attuned to nature. While greens may disagree about the precise description of the society that is to come, they all promise that a green future will be a bright future.

Taken together, these four points frame an indictment of the ecological sins of contemporary society: but they also suggest that the green perspective embodies a multi-stranded critique, and a set of positive values and prescriptions, which are not directly deducible from 'environmental' postulates. Social and economic inequalities, centralization and bureaucratization, the erosion of local control, militarism, and the oppression of women are all denounced by greens. In contrast, they affirm the centrality to their social vision of equity, participation, grassroots democracy, local control, vibrant communities and women's rights. These elements are meshed out in very diverse ways in different green perspectives — but all are staples of green argument. They are interwoven with the environmental critique, but their significance is not exhausted by the environmental...
dimension. Militarism, for example, leads to environmental destruction; but it is also condemned for the direct harm it inflicts on human societies. A re-localization of economic and social life would reduce environmental loadings, but it would also revive bonds of community. The interaction of environmental preoccupations with these critical foci and positive values gives green discourse its distinctive flavour: the arguments of green anti-militarism resonate di fferently from those of earlier pacifist movements, while the life in imagined green communities is not quite that presented in other communitarian visions.

Although the four ideas cited above — ‘natural values’, ‘natural limits’, a rejection of the prevailing ‘development trajectory’, and ‘green emancipation’ — were presented in relation to the environmental dimension, they potentially tie together many strata of green belief. Valuing nature, for example, can be interpreted also as an injunction to ‘learn from nature’ — to accept what nature can teach us about the ways of the world. Thus principles held to characterize natural systems can be commended as norms to orient human practice. ‘Mutualdependence’, ‘diversity’, and ‘equality’ are often cited in this regard: the interdependence of species in ecosystems suggests the importance of co-operation and community among humans; the variety of living forms typical of mature and healthy ecosystems is taken to endorse diversity within human societies; while the absence of stable hierarchies in nature is invoked to justify ecologist social organization.

The notion of limits can be applied not only to denote ‘external’ constraints which a finite ecosystem imposes on human projects, but also to imply that human capacities are bounded, and/or to refer to controls which we (should) choose to impose upon our behaviour. Many greens denounce the reductionist stance of modern science, and the arrogant assumptions of technological civilization: so much of the history of industrial society is a history of miscalculation and unintended consequences. They suggest that it is impossible for us to fully comprehend complex, unique and continuously evolving natural systems. Instead, we should acknowledge limits to human understanding and be cautious in our interference with natural processes. In parallel to this idea of human fallibility, greens may also argue (somewhat paradoxically) that one capacity humans do have is the ability to reflect on their conduct and modify their behaviour. We can say ‘this is enough’, and choose to limit the demands we place upon nature, to accept a more modest share of the earth’s resources, and to enjoy a less wasteful way of life. In other words, self-imposed limits can contain our behaviour within bounds proscribed by prudence and/or morality.

The notion of a pathological development trajectory can be related not only to what humans have done to nature, but also to what we are doing to each other. The unjustified extremes of poverty and affluence, the exploitation and oppression of one group by another, the brutal conflicts which rage in many corners of the world, are attributed to a distorted pattern of development which puts power and profit before ethics and the general welfare. And so the ‘emancipatory impulse’ is linked to various struggles to oppose injustice and to defend the vulnerable against oppression. The plight of the poor, of people in developing countries, of women, of working people, of pensioners, of indigenous peoples, and of many others can be presented as further indictments of the existing system. In some cases even producer groups — such as farmers, fishermen, and loggers (who are directly responsible for environmentally destructive behaviour) — can be presented as victims of a system which offers them little alternative. Emancipation for each constituency can be seen as congruent with the overall objective of dismantling modern industrialism in favour of an environment-friendly, people-friendly, ‘green’ society.

An idea like that of ‘appropriate scale’ which plays an important role in green argument also relates to these four elements. Most obviously, scale engages with limits — for a limit is a boundary beyond which rules that hold at one scale no longer apply. If the scale of disruption to a given ecosystem passes certain limits, the system will collapse; if the scale of the human economy trespasses beyond environmental limits, the result will be catastrophe. But scale also relates to natural values: for nature can be taken to suggest appropriate scales for many activities. Communities should be grounded in ecological scales, and natural features and processes (mountains, river catchments, and so on) may suggest suitable political boundaries. The pathological development trajectory has led us toward a cult of the ‘mega’ and the ‘global’, while institutions based in the local scales (where humans function most comfortably) are being undermined. Emancipation therefore depends upon reassuring the human world, in harmony with natural and human need.

**Analytical controversies**

To develop this account I would like briefly to turn to four issues which have troubled students of the green perspective: first, determining the point at which it gelled into an independent ideological approach; second, understanding how greens relate to the traditional left/right political continuum; third, assessing the place of the environmental critique within the green world-view; and fourth, considering diversity within the family of green approaches.

Although it is possible to trace back to antiquity ideas or dispositions associated with today’s green thinkers (such as reverence for nature, concern for the welfare of animals, voluntary simplicity and so on), it is generally accepted that as a coherent alternative the green perspective is a comparatively modern creation. Two views predominate in the literature: one locates the origins of a current which is typically referred to as ‘political ecology’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the other associates the genesis of green perspectives with the turbulent decade of the 1970s.

The first approach emphasizes philosophical foundations: that ‘ecologism’ emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century, as part of the intellectual response to the Darwinian challenge to traditional belief. It combined scientific, evolutionary and materialist ideas with organicist, holistic, naturalistic and vitalist cosmologies which invested nature with deep spiritual meaning. The dualism between man and nature (and between the sciences of man and the sciences of
nature) was overcome as humans acquired a place within nature, and both were understood to be subject to the same evolutionary process. Faith in traditional religion was displaced by a veneration of nature and the natural. "Holistic biology", and the ideas of 'energy economists' preoccupied with resource scarcities, helped focus a diffuse unease with the modern world and a longing for a simpler rural existence. The names of thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin, Ernst Haeckel (who coined the word 'ecology'), Konrad Lorenz, Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, and Frederick Shoddy feature in this sort of account. From nineteenth-century beginnings ecological thought is seen to ramify through the twentieth century, its exponents linked to currents as diverse as the 'Back To The Land' campaigns, town planning, the scouts, and organic farming. Particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, there was a strong link with conservative, nationalist, and fascist movements. On this reading, late-twentieth-century green perspectives appear as the most recent incarnation of ideas that have been with us for at least a century.

Although this approach casts some light on connections among diverse eddies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century belief, it contributes little to an understanding of the greens as a political phenomenon. Despite a welter of historical detail, the absence of attention to the specific contexts within which ideas emerged, and to the articulation of these ideas within the visions of individual thinkers and movements, means that this approach remains profoundly ahistorical. Similar organicist or evolutionary vocabularies, shared metaphysical assumptions, and endorsement of similar projects or technologies are confused with evidence of substantive political ideological affiliations.

The alternative account sets politics at centre stage. It sees the 1970s as the formative moment when the green perspective coalesced as a new ideological current, which self-consciously proclaimed its distinct identity and demonstrated a capacity to organize independently. Ideologies are, after all, phenomena of the era of mass politics; they are not just theories, but ideological constructs bound to political practice. To borrow Frieden's idiom, they require not only creators but also consumers. And the tension between ideas and political practice propels their evolution. It was during the 1970s that a host of new environmental (as opposed to conservationist) movements were born and the first green parties took shape. Political thinkers and publicists articulated a distinctive vision in parallel with such movements; and it was at this point that the label 'green' was appropriated to characterize the emergent perspective. This ideological creation was original, not because no one had suggested similar thoughts or advocated like causes before, but because here the ideas were drawn together — acquiring a political focus, critical mass, and practical embodiment — which gave birth to a new ideological tradition.

Much has been written about factors that explain the flowering of modern environmental consciousness during the 1960s and 1970s. Attention has been drawn to rapid technological and industrial development during the second half of the twentieth century which dramatically increased the scale of the human impact on the ecosphere. Changes in class and social structure leading to a 'post-industrial society', shifts in values and beliefs with the growth of 'post-material' concerns, and the transformation of risk profiles have been highlighted. Whatever the relative weight accorded to such factors, it is clear that a radical change in the political salience of environmental issues did occur. This can be chronicled in media coverage and survey data, but it was also manifest in significant institutional change: between the late sixties and the end of the 1970s new environmental agencies and ministries were established and new pollution-control laws were introduced by governments across the OECD states. Environmental movements generated pressure for reform, but they also benefited enormously from this legitimization of environmental concern. Greens took as their starting point that the new administrative response to the environmental challenge was inadequate, that a more radical form of social reconstruction was necessary, and that the campaign for such a transformation should form the basis for a new political identity. But the consolidation of the green alternative was paradoxically dependent upon this simultaneous ‘mainstreaming’ of environmental concern. The green alternative emerged in an epoch when environmental worries had become part of the dominant social discourse.

Other political developments which conditioned the context for the emergence of the greens included the heritage of the 'counter-culture' and 'new left' protest movements of the 1960s, and the anti-nuclear and 'new social movement' campaigns of the 1970s. The oil price shocks and a period of high inflation and economic instability strengthened the perception of the vulnerability of the existing system to crisis. Public faith in big science, big business and big government had been weakened. And, among those inclined to be critical of the status quo, there was disillusionment with the orthodox Marxist and social democratic variants of the socialist project, and frustration with the rigidity of the East/West ideological fissure.

Consider the famous slogan 'think globally, act locally'. This notion is only fully intelligible in an era when the 'global' has already achieved mass cultural resonance: in an era of satellites and inter-continental ballistic missiles, of transnational corporations and live television feeds covering events around the world. Much the same can be said for another slogan which played a role in carving out the initial space for green parties: 'neither left nor right, but moving forward'. The idea of transcending established ideological opposition is not new, but it achieved a particular bearing towards the close of a century during which national and international politics had been marked by a continuing left/right fissure. And it served to define a particular political space which could not have been marked out in that way in the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s.

This points to another important conundrum: the left/right orientation of green politics. Although some greens continue to insist that their political perspective cannot be located on the left/right continuum, most observers (and many greens) now agree that the centre of gravity of contemporary green politics is actually towards the left. Greens tend to support the cause of disadvantaged social groups, and advocate greater social equity. They criticize the existing distribution of economic and political power and advocate grassroots participation. Of course, this identification is far from complete: there are some greens
with more traditionalist orientations; many greens support specific policies generally associated with the right (restrictive controls on immigration, for example); and the caution which all greens display when it comes to disturbing nature and embracing new technologies (and associated patterns of life) gives their perspective a somewhat conservative tenor which is alien to the confident rationalism which long characterized the left. And yet, for the most part, greens find themselves allied with left-of-centre political formations and advocating policies that historically have had more appeal on the left.

This 'left bias' of green politics is hardly accidental, and it seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Its grounding is intellectual and practical. The modern green movement drew its ideas and activists primarily from professional movements of the left. At the time the perspective 'gelled' into a distinctive political current, resistance to established economic and political practices came largely from the left. The historical project of the extreme right was discredited in the eyes of the generation which gave birth to the greens, and the conservative projects for restructuring the regulatory/welfare state which were beginning to take shape offered little appeal. Moreover, the forces which greens continue to see arrayed against them - especially the powerful economic interests (the agro-industrial, construction, transport and military complexes) whose existence is predicated on the continuing pillage of nature and the perpetuation of social inequality - are more closely associated with the right. The greens want change, change which will inevitably disturb existing rights and entitlements and established distributions of power. In the context of the current disposition of political and ideological forces, the left seems more sympathetic to this project than do conservative parties. To put this another way, environmental issues are quintessentially distributional issues, and this establishes a certain affinity with the left. This is not to say that green parties might not find themselves in coalition with conservatives, or that some greens might not tilt in a rightward direction, but it is to argue that the centre of gravity of green perspectives is likely to remain on the left for the foreseeable future.

Also problematic is the inter-relation between the environmental and political values embodied in the green creed. Broadly speaking, green philosophers and political theorists emphasize the primacy of the ecological element - that this is the core of green thought, the central impulse from which attitudes to other issues (naturally) flow. In contrast, green politicians and activists often present a more polyvalent account, where social justice and equality, democracy and participation, women's emancipation and opposition to militarism bulk large. No doubt a professional bias comes into play here, as theorists strive for foundational rigour and logical consistency, while politicians are more conscious of rallying diverse constituencies to the cause. Yet an underlying tension does seem to be operative: for if the environmental strand is accorded the role of prime mover, what is the status of the political conclusions that are held to follow? And if the environment is reduced to just one issue among many, how can the green perspective avoid being reduced to an eclectic mishmash of oppositional postures?

One approach to this issue is represented by Robert Goodin who proposed a reconstruction of green theory based around a 'green theory of value'. He suggests that at the core of every ideology is a theory of the good which defines the moral vision which gives the perspective coherence. Goodin argues that greens should give pride of place to their value theory - which, roughly speaking, holds that things are valuable in proportion to their 'naturalness', and that the presence of a world beyond the human-made allows individuals to set their lives in a wider context. Green views on other issues, particularly 'agency' (including attitudes to democracy, decentralization, participation, and so on), and lifestyle change, should be rigorously subordinated to their theory of value. In this way, greens will remain focused on their core environmental concern, avoid distractions which might deter potential supporters, and expose the incoherence of attempts by other parties to co-opt elements of the green programme.

Goodin's account functions as both a description of green theory (what greens would believe if they were entirely consistent with the logic of their own principles) and as an explicit attempt to recast the ideology into a more potent configuration. On the first count, the problem is that the vast majority of greens would not recognize themselves in Goodin's portrayal. Setting aside the contentious presentation of 'the green theory of value', his understanding of the relationship between environmental and political elements in the green programme would not go down well. For example, Goodin adopts an essentially instrumental approach to democracy, emphasizing a means/ends distinction. He explains, 'to advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes'; and he asks 'what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter sorts of outcomes?'. In contrast, most greens do not approach politics in this way. They consider democracy and participation as foundational political values; and much the same could be said for decentralization and egalitarianism. These are judged to be important not only because they secure a specified environmental outcome, but also because they represent the right way for humans to live. In other words they are important in their own right, and help to secure other instrumental, essential and expressivist values. Even if one could show that in a specific situation democracy or participation would lead to unfavourable environmental outcomes, the faith of most greens in these values would remain unshaken. For they are convinced that if people had an appropriate value set, and a suitable institutional context, then democracy would work, and correct (environmentally sensitive) decisions would be forthcoming.

On the second count (strengthening the green case), Goodin thinks that the potency of an ideology depends upon its articulation of a unique value theory, and the building of tight logical links between this moral principle and a political programme. In fact, ideologies have complex cores: liberalism is associated not just with liberty, but with equality and rationality, and each of these may be interpreted and inter-related in diverse ways in different liberal variants. Links between moral perspectives and policy prescriptions are typically loose, multiple and historically - as much as logically - determined. Indeed, the capacity of an
ideology to survive changing intellectual fashions and political circumstances is directly related to its internal complexity, and the plurality of sources from which it can draw. In the evolution of ideologies, ambiguity and redundancy may defeat parsimony and faultless logic. Thus, far from strengthening the green edifice, Goodin’s reduction of its foundation to a single moral pillar could render the green tradition more vulnerable to assault.

A very different way of understanding the unity of green ideology has been proposed by Gayel Talshir.11 Surveying different approaches to the greens, she rejects the suggestions that greens have no ideology, that green thought is just a neo-Marxist variant, that it should be considered a ‘new politics’ ideology, or that it constitutes an ‘ecological’ or ‘environmental’ ideology. Like Freeden and many other analysts, Talshir insists that concern with nature cannot in and of itself found a coherent political worldview. The environment represents a complex of problems, not a political solution. While Freeden links this with a suggestion that green ideology has an undeveloped core, Talshir takes it as evidence of the free-standing significance to greens of the political values they typically articulate. She insists ‘toleration, stability, democracy, equality, tradition and feminism…are independent core concepts of an emerging green ideology, not derivable from ecological perceptions’.12 But Talshir also argues that the greens are peculiar in the extent to which different perspectives – which develop their critiques of the growth economy and of the unidimensionality of contemporary society on different terrains – exist within a single ideological formation. She argues that while ‘ecologism’ is a family of ideologies, it is but one ideological family ‘coexisting within the group known as “Green Ideology” together with a family of feminisms, a range of minority-right organizations and varied radical conceptions’.13

Talshir’s emphasis on the independent grounding of important green political values and on the multi-dimensional character of the green critique is perceptive, but we do not necessarily need to postulate a new type of ‘modular’ ideology to account for the diverse perspectives present within parties such as the German Greens. Considerable ideological diversity, hybridization and tension are typically manifest in political parties of most ideological complexes; but differences of vision and emphasis co-exist with a certain perception of shared identity and common purpose. Different sorts of conservatism have, for example, always co-existed within the British Conservative Party, although such diversity has not always been celebrated by the party leadership. There are greens who emphasise feminism or anti-militarism, but their political perspective is to be designated ‘green’, as opposed to simply feminist or anti-militarist; it is because there is substantial affinity with the perspectives of other greens, both within and without the ranks of a given party.

To return to the more general issue of the role the environmental critique plays in green ideology, it is most accurate to regard it not as the sole animating impulse, but rather as an ineliminable denominator. In other words, a perspective which did not place environmental protection and the revaluation of nature at the core of its political concerns would not qualify as ‘green’. In contrast, one which failed to cite grassroots democracy (or decentralization, or egalitarianism, or feminism, or anti-militarism) as a core political concern would not necessarily be ‘ruled out’ in the same way. Indeed, an approach might have virtually nothing to say about any one of these elements and still reasonably be considered ‘green’. And yet another perspective which did not include any of these elements among its core values would also not properly be termed ‘green’. It is not that this cluster of concepts is logically entailed by environmental concern, but that historically and practically they have become associated with the political perspective we term ‘green’. In other words, the ecological component of green thought is ‘special’, not in the sense that it logically determines the physiology of the creed, but because without it the ideological manifestation in question would not be recognizable as green.

Finally, there is the problem of the range of perspectives manifest within the green ideological family. It is conventional to approach this diversity in terms of basic dichotomies, between ‘dark’ and ‘light’ green views, between ‘radical’ and ‘reformist’ greens, between ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ ecology, between ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘realism’, between ‘ecocentrism’ and ‘anthropocentrism’, and between ‘ecologism’ and ‘environmentalism’. As discussion in the literature has established, however, these terms capture different (though partially overlapping) opposites which are of varied importance for characterizing different green currents. Most of the terms have their origins in efforts by one segment of the green movement to differentiate its positions from those of its rivals; but no single opposition does more than hint at the complexity of contending currents. For instance, the ‘ecocentrism’ versus ‘anthropocentrism’ polarity which Robyn Eckersley postulates as the fundamental divide in her valuable work on green political theory is primarily a philosophical and ethical distinction; it is not necessarily useful for teasing out political divisions, the more so since (as Dobson and others have noted) in their public pronouncements most greens emphasize instrumental arguments for environmental protection. The ‘fundamentalist’ versus ‘realist’ fissure is more explicitly political, relating to the extent to which greens should adopt conventional political forms in order to advance their agenda through electoral politics; but it relates only loosely to other divisions. Dobson’s emphasis on ‘ecologism’ versus ‘environmentalism’ turns on the extent to which a perspective advocates a radical break with the ‘existing mode of social and political life’. Indeed, for Dobson ‘environmentalism’ (although qualifying for inclusion in a discussion of ‘green political thinking’) is not actually part of green ideology, because it lacks substantive content, can be reconciled with other existing ideological perspectives (you can have liberal environmentalists), and advocates a ‘managerial approach to environmental problems secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption’.14 This, of course, takes us back to our earlier discussion of what makes green perspectives ‘green’; and the problem is that Dobson emphasizes the degree of hoped-for change, rather than the definition of political allegiance in terms of green ideology. But ‘degree of radicalness’ is hard to specify: on some readings OECD governments already go beyond Dobson’s
A future for the greens?

During the brief span of their existence greens have had some influence on political life in industrialized states. In some countries green parties have scored considerable electoral success, and (usually in coalition with other political forces) have participated in local, regional or national governments. More generally, the greens have articulated a perspective to which established political currents have had to respond. Certainly the green message is reaching a larger audience than ever before.

Four developments stand out in particular. First there is the geographic spread of the movement. Green politics has now gained adherents across the developed world, and in Europe during the 1990s green parties increasingly appeared in countries to the south and east. Where such parties have not been established, or have proved electorally unsuccessful, there has nevertheless been a growth in groups which identify with the green project. Even in the United States the green presence has expanded largely and, whatever else it achieved, Ralph Nader’s presidential campaign raised the movement’s profile nationally. Second, there has been a marked strengthening of the institutional supports for green advocacy. Ideologies require a material infrastructure; they need resources and organization if they are to prosper and survive. Labour unions traditionally provided an underpinning for socialist movements, and in the late twentieth century, liberalism relied on bases within the academy when the electoral fortunes of parties bearing the liberal name declined. For the greens, the increased strength of green parties and movements (which in many European countries receive state funding) are of obvious significance. But so, too, is the growth of a ‘green civil society’—networks of co-operatives, professionals, and businesses associated with environmental and other green themes. Third, there is now a more widespread and complex interaction between green advocates and established power structures. Most obviously greens have been elected to political office and occu-

'environmentalism' (for they explicitly state that value changes and major shifts in patterns of production and consumption are required to address the environmental challenge); while leaders of some European green parties would fail to qualify as 'ecologists' for they do not embrace the 'ecocentric', 'holistic' values Dobson associates with true 'ecologism'.

Green views vary on more than one dimension, and divisions which appear acute from the position of someone outside the movement may not be those perceived as most significant to those within the movement. As a start, one needs to distinguish variation on three terrains: one related to valuation of the natural world (which entities deserve moral consideration? for what sorts of reasons?); one related to the critique of existing social institutions (what are the sources of the current crisis? what kinds of institutions should replace today’s flawed structures?); and one related to the strategy for generating change (what organizations and actions are most likely to effect change?). And on each of these terrains variation is multi-dimensional.
day. The pace of technological development (particularly in the life sciences) appears to be accelerating. And economic worries, re-emergent nationalisms and international tensions routinely eclipse the sorts of issues green wish to promote. If greens are content to do no more than articulate a continuously evolving social critique, then all may be well - for there is nothing more appealing than a clear target. But if they actually want to change the course of social development then current trends must be worrying; for the prevailing development model is spreading to every corner of the globe, economies and polities are being bound ever more tightly together, and with each year that goes by there is less 'nature' that remains to preserve. Now greens may hope that the excesses of the current orientation (the social, economic and environmental impacts of unbridled free trade, the indecent rush to cash in on genetic manipulation, and so on) will lead to cries and backlash. But even if this proves to be the case, it is unclear that the greens would be the main political beneficiaries.

Underlying this is the issue of how broad an audience greens can hope to attract. Support for green currents varies across the developed world, but in some countries they have obtained up to 10% of the vote in national elections. Although there is wider public sympathy for the green stand on particular issues (opposition to genetically-modified foods or nuclear power, for example), the proportion of electors who buy into the project as a whole remains small. And while some may be content to see the greens as a junior coalition partner - upholding certain values and keeping an eye on the dominant parties - few would be prepared to trust their economic and political future entirely to the greens. And this is in the countries where they have been most successful. Elsewhere the greens remain more marginal, and nowhere is this more true than in developing countries. Indeed, the failure of greens to develop ideological variants which address the concerns of the three-quarters of the human population living in the poorer regions of the globe must count as a signal weakness of the movement. If the green project is to have coherence, it cannot remain as a luxury with appeal only to those who enjoy the rich fruits of industrialism.

Green ideology provides a multi-stranded critique of contemporary social practices and a promise that things need not be as they are. While the critique is detailed and concrete, the images of the alternative future lack precision or are often implausible. They posit either too facile a reconciliation of all good things, or too draconian a rupture with existing patterns of life. To some extent this problem is faced by any ideology radically at odds with the existing pattern of societal organization: the social critique gains purchase in the world of the here and now, but the social vision depends upon conjuring up a future that just might be.

A more serious weakness in the structure of existing green variants relates to the absence of convincing accounts which bridge the gap between the (rejected) present and the desired (but indistinct) future. In other words, they lack adequate theories of directed social change. Too often greens do not advance beyond the aspirational level, their vision running something like this: 'we know what we don't like about contemporary society, and when we convince people of the validity of our perspective (by running election campaigns, distributing leaflets, confronting polluters, and so on) we will implement the green agenda'. Despite complaints about corporate power and state bureaucracy, scant attention has been paid to examining the structural possibilities for radical change. The point is not to elaborate a grand theory of 'green social agency', but to suggest concrete pathways through which change can be achieved over short-, medium- and longer-term horizons. More adequate green theories of social change would need to engage with issues such as the material and ideational factors that support existing social practices, the potentialities and limits of 'social steering', and priorities, stages and potential alliances. Take the ecological issue: greens need to establish which practices are most pernicious, which social forces are most deeply attached to such practices, how such attachments can be weakened, and what sorts of political alliances might isolate die-hards. The idea of 'gate-key' reforms is also important - initiating processes which open the path to further change, rather than stimulating countervailing forces which preclude further advance.

In a closely related vein, greens could do with more sophisticated accounts of the state. So far green views are largely parasitic on established social democratic, anarchist and Marxist theories, and have only begun to consider the potential (and limits) of the state's role in a green society. Moreover, state actors in their various guises have for decades, if not centuries, enforced the norms of capitalist production. This requires a more developed politics of green abundance.

Another difficulty lies in the green response to scientific and technological innovation. Although greens criticize the scientific and technological establishment and the hegemony of instrumental reason, they are not necessarily technophobes. Greens often invoke new scientific findings to challenge official claims, and they readily embrace certain types of technology (renewable energy, for example) - particularly when this appears compatible with 'sustainable' living and local control. Yet greens systematically reject 'technicist' solutions - proposals that appear to offer a technological way out of the contemporary environmental dilemma. For greens, social and lifestyle change remains essential. Moreover, there are many within their ranks who are happy to tap into emotive and anti-rationalist impulses, and the widespread fear of change in general, to gather public support for green campaigns. But does all this amount to a viable approach to the ceaseless rhythm of technological advance?

Like other political forces, greens are presented with a constant stream of technological innovation and potentialities, championed by powerful economic actors, to which they must react. But for the greens this is no peripheral issue, and responding to such developments (other than as 'nay-sayers', sitting on the sidelines) represents a real challenge. For example, environmental campaigners have had some success in stimulating public resistance to genetically-modified (GM) foods: they have exposed the commercial lobbies behind the drive to introduce GM technology, shown up conflicts of interest (where those who stand to gain from the new processes serve on the government safety panels), and
revealed significant flaws in existing regulatory frameworks. Proposals for labeling GM foods have found widespread support, but (as reports of cross contamination of GM and non-GM seed confirm) it is already too late to prevent environmental impacts arising from this technology. The threshold for the rapid development of genetic manipulation (including conscious manipulation of the human genome) has already been breached, and the point at which 'blanket bans' might have been viable has long passed. In the next century the economic, social, political and military consequences of this technology will be enormous—certainly it has the potential to bring more positive, but also more negative, consequences (both deliberate and unintended) than we can imagine today. But what sort of response can the greens deploy? The simplest position is to reject meddling with nature out of hand; but to stick to such a position may be to condemn one's perspective to irrelevance, as the technology penetrates daily living and transforms the natural and social world. Or will greens suggest a more nuanced view, in the hope of influencing the conditions under which the emergent technology is absorbed? Similar sorts of dilemma face greens in relation to other technologies and other problems, such as climate change politics.

Accelerating international economic and political integration—'globalization'—poses yet another difficulty for greens. Again, they are not alone, for issues relating to free trade and international governance have regularly perturbed established ideological traditions for more than a century and a half. But the green preference for local action and their focus on environmental consequences introduce new elements into the controversy. Again, it is far from clear what response—other than carving from the sidelines and wishing for another world—the greens can deploy.

Looking forward to the politics of this new century, it seems likely that environmental issues will occupy an increasingly important role in political deliberation and conflict. Further growth in the rich countries, continued industrialization in the poorer regions of the globe, and the intensive deployment of exotic technologies (particularly in the bio-sciences) will aggravate existing environmental burdens and generate new problems. In principle this should provide fertile ground for the further development of the greens: after all this is a perspective which has set the human/nature interaction at the core of its concerns. Certainly there will be no shortage of ethical and political dilemmas to pre-occupy green theorists; and the more practically engaged elements of the movement are unlikely to experience difficulties identifying targets for their campaigns. Reformist greens will provoke some adjustment in the behaviour of dominant political and economic actors; and their more radical brethren will continue to float dreams of alternative futures, suggesting ideas no respectable politician would dare to voice. As a whole, the green movement will maintain a standing critique of the environmental and human consequences of the path being marked out by the advance of our civilization. Yet whether the greens will be able to do more than act as permanent critics, mounting a forlorn rearguard action, remains an open question.

Notes and references


5 Bramwell, Ecology in the Twentieth Century.


11 Goodin, Green Political Theory.

12 Ibid., p. 169.


14 Freedon, Ideologies, p. 545.

15 Tahlilny, 'Modular ideology', p. 182.
12 Conclusion

Ideology – balances and projections

Michael Freeden

Ideology and control

One of the most creative tensions in the assessment of ideologies over the past century has been that between their face-value study – an 'intentionalist' approach to ideologies as a narrative located in time and space, in which we are simply told what ideologies want to tell us – and a critical approach to ideologies, as telling us substantively more than they intend, or as raising issues that derive from the very act itself of telling a story. The seeds of doubt were laid by Marx, and more specifically by Engels, who believed that nothing of consequence could be imparted by a body of ideas that was a product of illusions generated by an alienated, dehumanized and partial material existence. However, they threw out the baby of what was being said, while retaining the bath-water of how and why it was being said. That bath-water, cleansing though it was of previous platitudes, has by now been recycled rather too often. Ignoring the weight of such epistemological doubts, American behaviourists cemented the link between the study of ideologies and an account of what they voiced as a scholarly exercise in accurate description. This early- and mid-twentieth-century focus gave way to a re-emphasis on decoding ideologies and on their social construction, without many of the Marxist conclusions that could have followed. Diana Coole's chapter assists us in capturing that changed understanding. Feminism contributed to the new perspective by joining in the identification of the grand narrative as an organizing device rather than a representation of a reality. A different light could thus be shed on the nature of ideologies by presenting ideological families such as liberalism and socialism as a way of controlling narrative itself. Narrative became the dependent variable, one of the outputs of ideology, rather than the garb in which ideologies appeared. And because narratives were a noteworthy product of ideologies, the latter could be detached from the story they were telling. Feminism, often accused – together with other forms of postmodern thinking – of acts of intellectual vandalism committed on respectable overarching theories, was instead exposing (sometimes despite itself) the resourceful, malleable, pluralist nature of socio-political thought, yet still within the confines of a rationalist modernism. The discovery of ideational fragmentation turned out to be not a signal for the collapse of system and order but an affirmation of the