Environmentalism has recently tended to recruit from people on the left, offering ecological rectitude as part of a comprehensive call for 'social justice'. However, concern for the environment is shared by people of quite the opposite temperament, for whom constitutions and procedures are more important than social goals, and who regard the egalitarian project with scepticism. The appropriation of the environmental movement by the left is in fact a relatively new phenomenon. In Britain, the movement has its roots in the nineteenth-century reaction to the industrial revolution, in which Tories and radicals played an equal part; and the early opposition to industrial farming joins guild socialists like H.J. Massingham, Tories like Lady Eve Balfour, and eccentric radicals like Rolf Gardiner, who borrowed ideas from left and right and who has even been identified (by Patrick Wright) as a kind of fascist. Moreover, contemporary environmentalists are aware of the ecological damage done by revolutionary socialism – as in the forced collectivisation, frenzied industrialisation and gargantuan plans to shift populations, rivers and whole landscapes that we have witnessed in the Soviet Union and China. Left-wing thinkers will not regard those abuses as the inevitable result of their ideas. Nevertheless, they will recognise that more work is needed if the normal conscience is to be persuaded that socialism contains the answer to the growing ecological problem. At the same time, they seldom recognise any affinity with 'the right', and often seem to regard 'conservatism' as a dirty word, with no semantic connection to the 'conservation' that they favour.

The explanation, I believe, is that environmentalists have been habituated to see conservatism as the ideology of free enterprise, and free enterprise as an assault on the earth's resources, with no motive beyond the short-term gains that animate the market. Those who have called themselves conservatives in the political context are in part responsible for this misperception. For they have tended to see modern politics in terms of a simple dichotomy between individual freedom on the one hand, and state control on the other. Individual freedom means economic
freedom, and this, in turn, means the freedom to exploit natural resources for financial gain. The timber merchant who cuts down a rainforest, the mining corporation that ransacks the soil, the motor manufacturer who churns out an unending stream of cars, the cola merchant who sends out a million plastic bottles each day—all are obeying the laws of the market, and all, unless checked, are destroying some part of our collective environment. And because, in a market economy, the biggest actors do the most damage, environmentalists turn their hostility on big businesses, and on the free economies that produce them.

Abolish the market economy, however, and the normal result is enterprises that are just as large and just as destructive but which, because they are in the hands of the state, are usually answerable to no sovereign power that can limit their predations. It is a plausible conservative response, therefore, not to advocate economic freedom at all costs, but to recognise the costs of economic freedom, and to take all steps to reduce them, for example by legislation. We need free enterprise, but we also need the rule of law that limits it. When enterprise is the prerogative of the state, the entity that controls the law is identical with the entity that has the most powerful motive to evade it—a sufficient explanation, it seems to me, for the ecological catastrophe of socialist economies.

However, there is another and better reason for thinking that conservatism and environmentalism are natural bedfellows. Conservatism, as I understand it, means maintenance of the social ecology. It is true that individual freedom is a part of that ecology, since without it social organisms cannot adapt. But freedom is not the sole or the true goal of politics. Conservatism and conservation are in fact two aspects of a single long-term policy, which is that of husbanding resources. These resources include the social capital embodied in laws, customs and institutions; they also include the material capital contained in the environment, and the economic capital contained in a free but law-governed economy. The purpose of politics, on this view, is not to rearrange society in the interests of some overarching vision or ideal, such as equality, liberty or fraternity. It is to maintain a vigilant resistance to the entropic forces that erode our social and ecological inheritance. The goal is to pass on to future generations, and if possible to enhance, the order and equilibrium of which we are the temporary trustees.

This means that conservatism, in the eyes of its critics, will always seem to be doomed to failure, being no more than an attempt to escape the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Entropy is always increasing, and every system, every organism, every spontaneous order will, in the long term, be randomised. However, even if true, that does not make conservatism futile as a political practice, any more than medicine is futile simply because 'in the long run we are all dead', as Keynes famously put it. Rather, we should recognise the wisdom of Lord Salisbury's terse summary of his philosophy, and accept that 'delay is life'. Conservatism is the politics of delay, the purpose of which is to maintain in being, for as long as possible, the life and health of a social organism.

Moreover, as thermodynamics also teaches us, entropy can be countered indefinitely at the local level by injecting energy and exporting randomness. Conservatism emphasises historical loyalties, local identities and the kind of long-term commitment that arises among people by virtue of their localised and limited affections. While socialism and liberalism are inherently global in their aims, conservatism is inherently local: a defence of some pocket of social capital against the forces of anarchic change.

The conservative understanding of political action is therefore formulated, as a rule, in terms of trusteeship rather than enterprise, of conversation rather than command, of friendship rather than solidarity. Those ideas lend themselves readily to the environmental project, and it always surprises me that so few environmentalists seem to see this. It is as obvious to a conservative that our reckless pursuit of individual gratification jeopardises the social order as that it jeopardises the planet. And it is obvious, too, that the wisest policies are those that strive to protect and keep in place the institutions that place a brake on our appetites and that renew the sources of social consentment.

The major difficulty, from the environmental point of view, is that social equilibrium and ecological equilibrium are not the same idea, and not necessarily in harmony. Two examples illustrate the problem. Democracies seem to achieve equilibrium only in a condition of economic growth. Periods of stagnation, rapid inflation or impoverishment are also periods of radical discontent, in which envy, resentment and anger lead to instability. Hence the first concern of democratic governments is to encourage economic growth, regardless of the environmental costs of it. We see this in the present British government's attitude to airports, business parks and roads, the environmental impact of which is put out of mind once these things are seen as economic assets. We see it, too, in the American response to the Kyoto accord. It is not big business that puts the real pressure on the American House of Representatives not to ratify such agreements, but the desire of its members to be re-elected.

1 Trusteeship is associated with Burke, Moses and Gierke; conversation with Okesheott; friendship with Aristotle. All are trying to reconstruct political authority as something intrinsically welcome to those who are subject to it.
Nor is democracy the only problematic case. Other forms of social equilibrium may equally pose a threat to the environment, not because they depend on economic growth, but because they depend on population growth, or on the consumption of some finite resource like a rainforest. Consider traditional Islamic societies, of the kind to be observed in North Africa and Saudi Arabia. These achieve equilibrium only when families enjoy spheres of private sovereignty, under the tutelage of a patriarch whose social standing is constantly enhanced by his reproductive powers. Each family must be forever adding to its retinue of sons if it is to retain its position. The result, in modern conditions, is a population explosion that is rapidly destroying the environment of Muslim Arabia, and spilling over into a Europe whose institutions and traditions are profoundly incompatible with the Muslim conception of the moral life.

The conservative response to this kind of problem is to recognise that environmental equilibrium is a part of any durable social order. The conception put before us by Burke is in fact one that ought to appeal to environmentalists. Burke’s response to Rousseau’s theory of the social contract was to acknowledge that political order is like a contract, but to add that it is not a contract between the living only, but between the living, the unborn and the dead (Burke 1987). In other words, to speak plainly, not a contract at all, but a relation of trusteeship, in which inherited benefits are conserved and passed on. The living may have an interest in consuming the earth’s resources, but it was not for this that the dead laboured. And the unborn depend upon our restraint. Long-term social equilibrium, therefore, must include ecological equilibrium.

This thesis, which environmentalists are apt to express in terms of ‘sustainability’, is better expressed in Burke’s way. For Burke reminds us of a motive that arises naturally in human beings, and which can be exploited for the wider purpose of environmental and institutional conservation: namely, love. This motive leads people both to create good things and to destroy them. But it turns of its own accord in a direction that favours conservation, since human love extends to the dead and the unborn: we mourn the one and plan for the other out of a natural superfluity of gratitude and good will. True social equilibrium arises when the institutions are in place that encourage that superfluity and channel it towards the maintenance of the social organism. The principal danger is that those institutions might be destroyed in the name of present emergencies, present appetites and the egregious needs of the merely living.

This emphasis on small-scale, observable and believable human motives is one of the strong points of conservative political thinking. Socialists place before us ideals of equality and social justice. But they seldom trouble to ask whether anyone – still less whether everyone – is motivated to pursue those things. The same problem arises with the environmentalists’ goal of sustainability. It may be my goal and yours: but what about Jill, John and Marianne? Liberals are on safer ground with their ruling concept of liberty: it can be assumed that rational beings will aim for liberty, since liberty is the pre-condition of aiming for anything. On the other hand, people often surrender part of their liberty, and the principal cause of their doing so is the emotion – namely love – on which durable societies are founded.

It seems to me that the greatest weakness in radical environmentalism has been its failure to explore the question of human motivation. There is one overwhelming reason for the degradation of the environment, and that is human appetite. In the wealthier parts of the world people are too many, too mobile, too keen to gratify their every desire, too unconcerned about the waste that builds up in their wake, too eager, in the jargon of economics, to externalise their costs. Most of our environmental problems are special cases of this general problem. And the problem can be more simply described as the triumph of desire over restraint. It can be solved only when restraint prevails over desire, in other words, only when people have relearned the habit of sacrifice. For what do people make sacrifices? For the things that they love. And when do these sacrifices benefit the unborn? When they are made for the dead. Such was the core sentiment to which Burke and de Maistre made appeal.

There is a tendency on the left to single out the big players in the market as the principal culprits: to pin environmental crime on those – like oil companies, motor manufacturers, logging corporations, agribusinesses, supermarkets – who make their profits by exporting their costs to future generations. But this is to mistake the effect for the cause. In a free market these ways of making money emerge by an invisible hand from choices made by all of us. It is the demand for cars, oil, cheap food and expendable luxuries that is the real cause of the industries that provide these things. Of course it is true that the big players externalise their costs whenever they can. But so do we. Whenever we travel by air, whenever we visit the supermarket, whenever we consume fossil fuels, we are exporting our costs to future generations. A free economy is one that is driven by individual demand. The solution is not the socialist one of abolishing the free economy, since this merely places massive economic power in the hands of unaccountable bureaucrats, who are
society addicted to fast food, tourism, luxury and waste is to risk the anger of those who need to be converted. Not only are there no votes to be won by seeking to close airports, to narrow roads or to return to a local food economy. There is the serious risk of making matters worse, by representing environmental protection as the cause of nostalgic cranks. All environmental activists are familiar with this reaction. But I am surprised that they do not see that it is a version of the very same reaction that is directed towards social conservatives, when they defend the beleaguered moral order that was — until a few decades ago — passed from generation to generation as a matter of course. Environmentalists and conservatives are both in search of the motive that will defend a shared but threatened legacy from predation by its current trustees.

Rational self-interest is not, I think, the motive that we are seeking. For rational self-interest is subject to the well-known free-rider and prisoner’s dilemma syndromes, and cannot avert, but on the contrary will always promote, ‘the tragedy of the commons’. Social contract theorists, from Hobbes to Rawls, have attempted to overcome this problem, but always they come up against some version of the original difficulty: why is it more reasonable to bide by the contract than to pretend to bide by it?

What is needed is a non-egoistic motive that can be elicited in ordinary members of society and relied upon to serve the long-term ecological goal. Burke proposed the ‘hereditary principle’, as protecting important institutions from pilage or decay, and believed that people have a natural tendency to accept the limits that this principle places on their desires. Hegel argued for the priority of non-contractual obligations, of the kind that sustain the family, and believed that similar obligations could be recuperated and exercised at the political level. In similar vein, de Maistre gave a central place to piety, as a motive that puts divinely ordained traditions and constitutions above the temptations of self-interest.

None of those suggestions is likely to carry complete conviction today, though each tries to frame a picture of human motivation that does not make rational self-interest the sole ground for collective decision-making. Burke’s invocation of the hereditary principle is of particular interest, since it engages directly with what he predicted (rightly as it happened) would be the outcome of the French Revolution — namely, a squandering of inherited resources and a wholesale loss of what we would now call ‘social capital’, including law, educational institutions and public or quasi-public endowments.

Burke’s model of inheritance was the English hereditary estate, which removed assets from the market, protected them from pillage, and
erected in the place of absolute ownership a kind of trusteeship, with the life tenant as beneficiary. This institution, protected by law, withheld land and natural resources from exploitation and endowed tenants for life with a kind of sovereignty on condition that they passed the land unencumbered to their heirs. No environmentalist can be insensitive of the enormous ecological benefit of 'settled land', so conceived. This was a resource that could not be exploited for all it was worth. It had to be used for the benefit of the 'successors in title' – in other words, sustainably. Modern environmentalists are likely to be sensible too of the social inequalities and hierarchies that this form of ownership perpetuated. And those of a leftist persuasion will no doubt share the passionate distaste expressed by Raymond Williams, in The Country and the City, for a social order that (according to Williams at least) kept the real producers unrewarded and the idlers forever in clover. The Settled Land Acts, passed and amended at various times during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gave tenants for life the right to convert landed estates into monetary capital, by selling the land to someone who would be free to develop it and retaining the proceeds in trust for the successors in title. In no time the industrialists and the mining corporations had moved in. The result was a vast increase in the wealth of Britain, the first steps towards social equality, and a century of environmental destruction.

Burke saw the hereditary principle as a psychological obstacle before those who had wished to lay their hands on the estates, the endowments, the church-owned and institution-owned buildings and treasures, that had safeguarded national assets of France from generation to generation. And he foresaw that, once the principle was rejected, restraint would have no motive, and the assets would be seized and squandered. But to respect the hereditary principle means to accept unequal holdings, hereditary status and the influence of family over individual fortunes. It is impossible to combine this state of mind with the modern demand for equality, which loudly affirms the rights of the living over the paper claims of the dead.

We cannot return to the kind of social motivations that Burke called upon: people don't think that way any more. But we should take a lesson from Burke, Hegel and de Maistre. We should recognise that environmental protection is a lost cause if we cannot find the human motive that would lead people in general, and not merely their self-appointed representatives, to advance it. And here, I think, is where environmentalists and conservatives can and should make common cause. And that common cause is local – specifically national – loyalty (and see de-Shalit, chapter 5).

Many environmentalists on the left will acknowledge that local loyalties and local concerns must be given a proper place in our decision-making if we are to counter the adverse effects of the global economy. But they will tend to baulk at the suggestion that local loyalty should be seen in national, rather than communitarian, terms. However, there is a very good reason for emphasising nationality. For nations are communities with a political shape. They are predisposed to assert their sovereignty by translating the common sentiment of belonging into collective decisions and self-imposed laws. Nationality is a form of territorial attachment. But it is also a proto-legislative arrangement. And it is through developing this idea of a territorial sentiment that contains the seeds of sovereignty within itself, that conservatives make their distinctive contribution to ecological thinking.

A useful contrast is provided by George Monbiot, who has trenchantly argued the case for some kind of global politics, through which ordinary people can fend off the disasters that are being concocted within the global economy and give voice to their desire for a safe, equitable and sustainable economic order. And I suspect that this would be the preferred way forward for those who have retained some vestige of the old socialist agenda, and who still wish to combine environmental rectitude with social justice. However, this approach is premised on two highly questionable assumptions: first, that sustainability and social justice can be combined, and secondly, that ordinary people, given the choice, would opt for sustainability rather than instant gratification. In some circumstances they would, of course. But it is precisely those circumstances that the global economy destroys.

The conservative approach, it seems to me, is more reasonable, even if it is also less ambitious. Rather than attempt to rectify environmental and social problems on the global level, conservatives seek local controls and a reassertion of local sovereignty over known and managed environments. This means affirming the right of nations to self-government and to the adoption of policies that will chime with local loyalties and sentiments of national pride. The attachment to territory and the desire to protect that territory from erosion and waste remain a powerful motive, and one that is presupposed in all demands for sacrifice that issue from the mouths of politicians (Scruton 2004). For this motive is the simple and powerful one, of love for one's home.

Take the example of Great Britain. Our environment has been a preoccupation of political decision-making for a very long time. Landscape, agriculture and climate have been iconised in our art and literature and have become foundational for our sentiments of national identity. Our planning laws, immigration laws and transport strategies until recently reflected this. However, we also know that our country is overcrowded, that its environment is being eroded by urban sprawl,
commuter traffic and non-biodegradable waste, that its agriculture is under threat from European edicts and that – largely on account of the recent surge in immigration – our population is growing beyond our capacity to absorb the environmental costs. Sentiments of national loyalty can be called upon to gain support for policies that would control these entropic effects, and which would reflect the longstanding conservative goal of maintaining an inherited body politic in being, as an autonomous and self-reproducing unit. At this local, national, level, coherent environmental policies and coherent conservative policies seem to me to coincide.

And it is only at this local level that I believe it is realistic to hope for improvement. For there is no evidence that global political institutions have done anything to limit global entropy – on the contrary, by encouraging communication around the world, and by eroding national sovereignty and legislative barriers, they have fed into that global entropy and weakened the only true sources of resistance to it. I know many environmentalists who seem to agree with me that the WTO is now a threat to the environment, not merely by breaking down self-sufficient and self-reproducing peasant economies, but also by eroding national sovereignty wherever this places an obstacle before the goals of multinational investors. And many seem to agree with me that traditional communities deserve protection from sudden and externally engineered change, not merely for the sake of their sustainable economies, but also because of the values and loyalties that constitute the sum of their social capital. The odd thing is that so few environmentalists follow the logic of this argument to its conclusion, and recognise that we, too, deserve protection from global entropy; that we, too, must retain national sovereignty as our greatest political asset in the face of it; and that we, too, must retain what we can of the loyalties that attach us to our territory, and make of that territory a home. Yet, insofar as we have seen any successful attempts to reverse the tide of ecological destruction, these have issued from national or local schemes to protect territory recognised as ‘ours’ – defined, in other words, through some inherited entitlement. I am thinking of the recycling initiatives that are gradually freeing Germany from the plague of plastic bottles, the legislation that freed much of the United States from polythene bags, the clean energy initiatives in Sweden and Norway, the Swiss planning laws that have enabled local communities to retain control over their environments and to think of those environments as a shared possession, and so on. These are small-scale achievements, but they are better than nothing. Moreover, they are successful because they make appeal to a natural motive – which is love of country, love of territory and love of that territory as home.

That, it seems to me, is the goal towards which serious environmentalism and serious conservatism both point – namely, home, the place where we are, the place that defines us, that we hold in trust for our descendents, and that we don’t want to spoil. Many of those who have seen this connection between conservatism and environmentalism have also – like Patrick Wright – been suspicious of it (Wright 1998). And local environmentalism between the wars – especially in Germany – was undeniably part of the collectivist turn, even if only circumstantially connected to the Nazi and Communist frenzy. However, I think it is time to take on a more open-minded and imaginative vision of what conservatism and environmentalism have to offer each other. For nobody seems to have identified a motive more likely to serve the environmentalist cause than this one, of the shared love for our home. It is a motive in ordinary people. It can provide a foundation both for a conservative approach to institutions and a conservationist approach to the land. It is a motive that might permit us to reconcile the demand for democratic participation with the respect for absent generations and the duty of trusteeship. It is, in my view, the only serious recourse that we have in our fight to maintain local order in the face of globally stimulated decay. And it is worth adding that, insofar as thermodynamics has a story to tell, it is this one.

This is why I think conservatives are likely to dissociate themselves from currently fashionable forms of environmental activism. Radical environmentalists are heirs to the leftist suspicion of nations and nationhood. They repudiate old hierarchies, and strive to remove the dead from their agenda, being largely unmoved by Burke’s thought that, in doing so, they also remove the unborn. They define their goals in global and international terms, and support NGOs and pressure groups which they believe will fight the multinational predators on their own territory and with weapons that make no use of national sovereignty.

Conservatives dislike this approach for two reasons. First, the NGOs and pressure groups that are favoured by the activists are as unaccountable and unrepresentative as the predators they oppose. Secondly, they recruit their following through hatred and demonisation – hatred of the big businesses, the big polluters, the apologists for capitalism and so on, against whom they see themselves pitted as David against Goliath. In other words, they put politics on a war footing, in the manner of St Just and Lenin. This runs totally counter to the conservative desire to found politics in friendship and conversation, and to resolve conflicts
Conservatism

with other ‘anti-’ campaigns – anti-racism, anti-hunting, anti-animal experiments, anti-nuclear and so on – in which the punishment without trial of imagined criminals cancels the desire for reasoned argument. Conservatives wrongly dismiss the whole environmental movement as a socially divisive one, endorse Björn Lomborg on the grounds that someone hated by the environmentalists must be a Good Thing, and try to pretend that the environment is an exclusively left-wing concern, and one that has no place in conservative political thinking.

My own hope is that environmentalists will grow out of the witchhunting mentality that has alienated conservatives, and that conservatives will cease to be defensive about their true agenda, which is the one implied in their name. I would like to see an Ecologist magazine that makes room, in its scheme of things, for old Tory values of loyalty and allegiance. For it seems to me that the dominance of international decision-making by accountable bureaucracies, unaccountable NGOs and corporations accountable only to their shareholders (who may have no attachment to the environment which the corporations threaten) has made it more than ever necessary for us to follow the conservative path. We need to retreat from the global back to the local, so as to address the problems that we can collectively identify as ours, with means that we can control, from motives that we all feel. And that means being clear as to who we are, and why we are in it together and committed to our common survival. I respect George Monbiot’s attempt to identify this first-person plural in planetary terms, just as I respect the Enlightenment conception of the human being as a rational agent motivated by universal principles. As a conservative, however, I bow to the evidence of history, which tells me that human beings are creatures of limited and local affections, the best of which is the territorial loyalty that leads them to live at peace with strangers, to honour their dead and to make provision for those who will one day replace them in their earthly tenancy.

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