Is Liberalism Environment-Friendly?

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The state of the environment is a novel issue on the political agenda, yet it is one of the most important. People the world over have begun to realize that the damage to the environment caused by human activities is drastic and at times even irreversible. The pollution of the soil, contamination of water by chemicals, air pollution, the damage to the ozone layer, acid rain, the complications in radioactive waste management, the extinction of certain animal species, deforestation, misguided urban development—all these and other phenomena constitute what is now widely called "the environmental problem."

Some people tend to think that scientists, or engineers, can solve, or at least suggest solutions to all these problems. But although theoretically speaking most environmental problems have scientific solutions, in practice these solutions are thrust aside by economic criteria and considerations. Now, the latter are simply the reflection of social and political ideologies, and so, in fact, environmental policies involve decisions on the allocation of financial resources and time, the distribution of money and political power, and on public priorities. Consequently, the solution to these problems is political, with the result that philosophers and political theorists have tried to find the moral grounds for environment-friendly policies. This paper deals with this attempt. My argument is twofold: first, that liberalism, for a number of reasons that will be investigated here, has provided a good framework for the evolution of the "Green" ideas and environmental philosophy. But second, that with regard to environmental policies, liberalism nevertheless faces difficulties: while it allows and encourages discussion of environmental issues, it cannot permit its outcome, namely the implementation, maintenance, and justification of environmental policies, and therefore it precludes constructive public action to secure environmental protection.

LIBERALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

It may be argued that at first appearance liberalism and environmental philosophy do not tie in with each other because liberalism's most fundamental feature—the contract—leaves out those who cannot join in it, that is, trees, rocks, rivers, animals, and so on. The most prominent of contemporary liberal theorists, John Rawls, for instance, leaves this issue to metaphysics. Others have tried to follow Rawls's path, and yet modify it so that it generates an animal rights ethics, or show that his theory implicitly requires extensive environmental policies. But in this section my aim is not so much to show how liberalism and environmental philosophy can be seen as identical twins or as ideal ideological bedfellows, but rather to argue that liberal societies have become a fertile ground for the promotion of ecological attitudes and environmental philosophy. There are four main reasons for this: the first two reasons lie in the sphere of philosophy, or theory, and involve both the content of the liberal idea and the tradition of liberal thought.

Let us start with the former. One of the main components of liberalism is anti-chauvinism: the moral agent does not automatically exalt its own virtues and discredit those of others. (The moral agent could be a single person or a collective body to which the person belongs, whether it is a voluntary body, for example, a party, firm, or a body into which the person was born, for example, a nation, race, gender, class.) Chauvinists do not consider "others" on equal terms, but liberals have rejected such attitudes and instead propound the idea that all people are equal since they are all human beings cast in the same mold. Hence liberals have contended that all humans deserve equal rights, and that we should follow a policy of "respect for others" and "respecting others as equals." In short, liberalism as a social philosophy has rejected all expressions of chauvinism from national to male chauvinism.

At the same time the situation in which humans deplete resources and damage the environment has been described on several occasions, and quite rightly, as "man (or human) chauvinism" with respect to the ill-treatment of
nonhuman animals (sometimes even plants or ecosystems) and their exclusion from the ethical community.

It is only natural, then, that many liberals, both theorists and politicians, have adopted Green ideas and ecological attitudes: the essence of liberalism, as indicated above, is the philosophy of “respect for others.” An environmental attitude implies extending the notion of “others” to include nonhuman animals, “all sentient creatures,” or even “all living objects” or “ecosystems.”

A land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such.10

Most liberals would find it difficult to adhere to “holism” or to Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic,” which rests upon the premise that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts; but it is argued that the elements of antichaunism and “respect for others” that have characterized liberal thought have influenced and contributed to the emergence of “Green” ideas, at least in their defense of individual entities in the environment. Admittedly, many greens are keen on collections of living objects, for example, species, rather than individual entities. This will be discussed below, where I suggest that a more social type of liberalism suits environmental issues. It also remains to develop a theory of humans’ relationship with the nonsentient objects; Christopher Stone has perhaps shown the way.11 Nevertheless, Roderick Nash has drawn an interesting analogy in this connection between the liberal political campaign against slavery in America and the environmentalists’ attempt to persuade the public that the circle of the ethical community should be enlarged to include animals, and even plants, or ecosystems. Just as the Abolitionists were considered radical when they claimed that blacks were being ill-treated and denied any moral status, so the environmentalists are regarded as radical today. Consequently, Nash may be right in claiming that environmental ethics is a “logical extrapolation of the powerful liberal tradition.”12 Liberals in the nineteenth century passed from male chauvinism and racism to moral universalism, environmentalists today pass from a human chauvinism to a broader moral universalism, arguing that “the conscious suffering of a sentient creature is indeed intrinsically bad from that creature’s standpoint.” Thus, we look at other species

[as we look at ourselves, seeing them as beings which have a good they are striving to realize just as we have a good we are striving to realize . . . . Hence their lives can be made better or worse by the way humans treat them, and it is possible for humans to take their standpoint and judge what happens to them in terms of their well-being [emphasis in original].]13

Now while liberals in the nineteenth century wished to protect the vulnerable, that is, the potential victims of modernity, and progress, environmentalists towards the end of the twentieth century still protect the victims of modernity, but unlike progressive forces in the nineteenth century, they extend the circle of protection to include the natural environment.

So much for the content of liberalism. But there is a second aspect of liberal theory that is built into the tradition of liberal philosophy. Liberals have always subjected their positions, values, ideas and theories to critical scrutiny, and have been the proponents of openness and tolerance, not only in political life, but in the academic and philosophical debate as well.14 Even philosophers and theorists who attack the liberal tradition for its inability to tackle, understand, or solve ecological problems,15 must admit that they can do so because they live and work in a liberal and tolerant society.

Moreover, in order to accept environmental philosophy one must be relatively open to new ideas and tolerant of criticism—not only of one’s own theory, but also of one’s methodology. This is because environmental philosophy is (most) biocentric or ecocentric, rather than anthropocentric: that is, it considers nonhuman objects (individual animals, plants, or ecosystems) as moral “clients” as well as human beings, and unlike traditional morality, it discusses the moral relationship between humans and nonhuman entities. So while one should be careful in claiming similarity between liberalism and environmental philosophy (just because the former argues for tolerance), it seems fair to maintain that it is at least partly due to liberalism’s rejection of methodological monism and fostering of a philosophical and intellectual milieu in which new ideas can flourish, that environmental philosophy has emerged.16

The third reason why liberalism became the breeding ground for a flourishing of ecological attitudes lies in the sphere of internal politics. I refer here to a tradition of defending the individual against the church, the state, large-scale industries and firms. This started in the eighteenth century with the defense of the individual against the state or church, followed by a warning that democracy might still yield despotism. A suspicion of the despotic rule of the majority (thus, liberals defended the minorities—especially the intellectuals—from the masses) grew into the ideology of citizens’ rights in the twentieth century. Recently liberalism became the defender of the underdog, a crusader against monopolies and for proper government and universal law.17

The same stand is taken today by environmentalists: they must challenge the activities of huge industries and firms, mainly because they are unsustainable. Such firms, for purely profit-making motives, often pollute the air or the water, deplete forests, and in general neglect the right of individuals to a clean environment. The state must impose regulations, but very often the state, for economic and other reasons, also ignores the dangers to individuals. The role of environmentalists, then, is to document the situation, publish warnings, and sometimes take the liberty to act.18

Indeed, this stand is taken by many environmentalists. Even Jonathan Forrntt, ex-director of Friends of the Earth in Britain and one of the leaders of the British Green Party, who attacks liberal politicians for their lack of support for the Green cause,19 employs the liberal terminology of rights when presenting his Green philosophy.
The fact that people’s rights are being denied is in itself a serious enough problem. And the fact that there are so few—who are prepared either to inform people of the denial of their rights or to help them to fight for those rights—turns a problem of indifference into a crisis of inaction [emphasis added].

Last, a fourth reason why ecological attitudes have taken root in liberal societies lies in the sphere of international relations. Here one particular element inherent in liberal thought should be highlighted: internationalism. Admittedly this notion sometimes stands for “free trade,” which is not environment-friendly, according to many environmentalists. But at the same time, internationalism embodies a strong belief in and reliance on multilateral agreements and international organizations, together with the conviction that political problems may be solved by sometimes tiresome negotiations and that national interests do not necessarily run counter to international cooperation. While many people consider the international arena as a place where “might is right,” and where those whose interests are harmed can only complain post factum, liberals have regarded international relations as a sphere in which it is possible to foresee problems and apply the treatment before the damage is caused.

All these elements are crucial, because environmental problems can and must of course be tackled only through international cooperation. This is precisely the element that is both lacking and needed in contemporary politics in regard to the solution of environmental problems, which are rarely entirely local in character. Indeed, the idea that prevention is better than cure has been the underlying rationale for the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the Toronto Declaration, the London Dumping Convention, Our Common Future, the 1992 UNCED in Rio de Janeiro, and other notable international agreements.

At this point it may be argued that at least a few of the features of liberalism, discussed so far, characterize other currents of thought and ideologies as well, for example, socialism. This may be true, although the second feature, that is, the rejection of methodological monism and advancing academic pluralism is, I believe, characteristic mainly of liberalism. But even if not, my argument is neither that liberalism is a necessary condition for the emergence of environmental philosophy, nor that it is a sufficient condition, but rather that liberalism—as a philosophy and a political attitude—influences, stimulates, and encourages the environmental deliberation and the rise of Green thought.

THE POLITICAL TASK

While in recent years much thought has been given to ecology, it seems that it has nevertheless been too little. The damages to the environment are now of such horrifying proportions that many people think that these problems call for radical and urgent solutions, an approach not necessarily compatible with traditional liberal democracy’s reluctance to undertake dramatic changes. And yet, now, in the 1990s the world is witnessing a world-wide democratization and the flourishing of liberal-democratic ideas, and no one should be required to abandon this trend.

The extremely complex political mission for the 1990s, then is two-fold: on the one hand, no longer to relieve ecological “suffering,” but rather to introduce reforms radical enough to save the environment and reverse what is still reversible; and on the other hand, to ensure this should not come about at the price of imposing regulations that limit or reduce liberties. Thus, there are two dimensions to this mission: to sustain the growing enthusiasm for democracy and liberty and at the same time to save the environment.

As already indicated above, these two dimensions are closely correlated. Many environmentalists, political theorists, and philosophers, in the light of environmental problems, among them scarcity of resources and pollution, have expressed pessimism and anxiety regarding the future of liberal democracy. Lack of resources on the one hand, and selfish, or self-interested, behavior on the other, has caused them to believe that the only solution might be the imposition of regulations and policies against people’s wills. William Ophuls, for example, wrote that “the return of scarcity portends the revival of age-old political evils, for our descendants if not ourselves.” As Paehlke points out, all these writers fear that the only possible outcome will be “severe economic restraints, self-discipline beyond that which is likely to develop voluntarily.”

But Ophuls’s prophecy need not necessarily come to pass. For instance, while his suggestion of replacing the market by political action is, I believe, welcome (see below), it is still questionable whether liberty should give way to authority and egalitarian democracy should be abandoned for the sake of “political competence and status.” Ophuls’s appeal for a strong leadership—reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw’s Man and Superman—is not the only alternative.

It seems that democratic societies should be looking for a middle path, which might include, at least prima facie, noncoercive, but planned and consistent policies. These policies must be in line with sustaining and promoting democracy and people’s liberties, and yet they may also imply a shift from discussing environmental issues politically to a politics of the environment, and hence state intervention. This leads us to the second main question of the paper.

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND LIBERALISM: INDIVIDUALS’ ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR

Why does liberalism outside the debate in the universities fail to justify environmental policies? What happens when it comes to real politics? The debate in the universities has been mainly focused on the question of whether or not there are intrinsic values in nature, or on the issue of animals’ rights, because
it has never been faced with the actual need to convince the other side, for example, developers, vivisectionists, and so forth. But when politicians come to justify their policies to the general public, they must do this in more traditional, general, and popular terms and it is at this point that liberalism runs into difficulties.

Now, in order to demonstrate this, a distinction should be made between two conceptions of politics that represent two interpretations of liberalism. One, which generally speaking is more common in contemporary mainstream American liberalism, is based on the values of neutrality, minimal state intervention, an opposition to regulations, and a concept of politics as an aggregate of autonomous decisions—all of which are antithetical to environmental policies. The other interpretation, sometimes called "social liberalism," is not hostile to advancing certain ideas of the good (for example, conservation), and is more open to state intervention.

But before we discuss the best conception of politics in the context of ecology, a more radical liberal argument, that the state should not intervene at all because individuals' economic behavior is the best foundation for solving environmental policies, needs to be refuted. I deliberately refrain from claiming to refute the "market approach" to the environment. This is a much debated issue, and had I set out to do this, I should have written a separate article. But I would like to examine the literature on the premises of the market approach in our context, with special attention to the "correct" (not in the sense of politically correct) role of politics.

First of all, many arguments have been put forward against the economic behavior approach with respect to the environment. According to several ecologists, we can no longer trust the magic and the invisible hand of the market to do the work for us; we must plan and initiate. Individuals' economic behavior has proved to be both inefficient and inequitable in coping with ecology.

For instance, Jeremy Seabrook, an ex-member of the British Labour Party and currently a Green activist, contends that the market is the best and most efficient mechanism to ruin the entire universe. In spite of this, people all over the world have been attracted to the idea of the market and its promise of a better material future, and so forth, because "the economy became the arena in which the guilt for what had happened in WW II was to be assuaged." The market, he argues, became "the object of a superstitious reverence: if only this could be made to work, to grow, to provide, we would surely gain exemption from any recurrence of the barbarities of the recent past." The market, he contends, was successful in doing just this, but it cannot provide what people really need and long for: a pleasant and harmonious life. In the east, he claims, the imported idea of the market ruined the traditional rural way of life and its social manifestations, through the process of urbanization, whereas in the west the market ruined our conception of nature.

But the critique of the economic behavior approach in relation to the environment is also based on economic arguments, using "market" terminology to demonstrate that individuals' behavior cannot tackle the environmental issue. According to those arguments, this will always result in more pollution, because the costs of this pollution are borne by nature as well as by other people who share the environment, rather than by the polluter itself. The polluter does not have to be motivated by ill will; this is ingrained in the idea of the market and its very "imperative," as Eckersley calls it—"grow or die." Such private attitudes cannot respect environmental notions of limits to growth and carrying capacity. An environment-friendly product is likely to be more expensive than its rival product, and hence no "rational" (that is, profit-seeking) entrepreneur will consider such products.

At this point, market advocates put forward the idea of penalties for the polluter. Let us intervene slightly in the market, they say, and charge the polluter for what he or she has done. So anybody who pollutes, depletes, or utilizes a certain natural resource beyond a certain degree will have to pay for it one way or another. But how can we assess the damages? Can we do this when the damage is not local, or within national borders, but rather international, for example, acid rain in Canada due to air pollution in the U.S.A.? How do we assess the damage when only a small and very specific section of society is hurt (for example, the workers in a factory, or those who used to play golf on a ground that is now to be developed)? Moreover, it is very likely that the consumers themselves have to pay for the pollution that the manufacture causes, especially in the cases of monopolies or special products that very few firms, or even only one firm produces. So if all polluting manufactures are charged for the pollution they cause, they will transfer the cost to the consumers. All consumers will then pay the real and full price of energy (including cleaning costs). This, in turn, will increase inequality, because the proportion of income spent on energy declines as income increases, although the use of energy increases. Thus, paying the full price of energy seems unfair for the worst-off.

But there is a further problem with regard to assessing environmental damages. While perhaps it is possible to determine the cost of a certain illness (for example, it is equal to the cost of hospital treatment plus a certain amount for compensations), how can we determine the "cost" of a life? Indeed the very term is strange. We are thinking of the value of life, but can it be translated into the "cost" of life? To estimate a person's probable future earnings or any other criterion of the value of life is obnoxious, because in that case someone who possesses this amount of money would be able to purchase another person's life. But, if, as some advocates of the individuals' economic behavior approach have maintained, this question is too artificial or even irrelevant (for instance, because most environmental problems do not cause death), there is still the question of assessing the value of the lives of nonhumans. Thus, how much is the life of a sea otter worth? David Moberg comments that

surveying people about how much the animals are worth to them or measuring lost income if sea otters disappeared may keep a few economists employed, but it does not answer the question.
This is indeed a cynical, although a serious reply.

If only one respondent said it was of infinite value, that would throw off the survey. If you limit the response to how much a person would be willing to spend, the result would obviously be affected by how much money people have, a standard flaw of market preference analysis.  

Yet Mobert's response is only part of the answer. The truth of the matter is that any calculation or assessment of the cost/value of animals' lives is, at the end of the day, anthropocentric, and any value in the world of nature is instrumental, just as in the Lockean theory only by mixing human labor with natural objects could these objects have some (instrumental) value. Preservation, according to this approach, is a problem only because if humans want to enjoy, say, sea otters, they must first "possess" them. What we should have done instead is to ask the animal itself for the value of its life (for itself). Just as, in the case of human lives, we do not ask a murderer what the value of his victim's life is, but rather ask the victim herself or himself, so should we do in the case of animals' lives. Now I do not wish to slip into the heavily discussed question of the degrees of life, the difference between a virus and a horse, and so on. But if, as indicated above, liberalism has enabled biocentrism to flourish, this is not the right moment to retreat to anthropocentrism. Indeed, this is true not only in cases resulting in the death of animals, but in any case of environmental damage. Evaluating the cost in terms of how much people would pay is totally anthropocentric, and if liberalism follows this path it will not be able to genuinely emerge as "environment-friendly" because environmentalists' criticism of the market approach to valuing is that what makes a certain good valuable is not the state of mind of the consumer who wants that good, but rather something inherent in that good.

Now, some "economic behavior" advocates may remain skeptical with regard to biocentrism. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that these calculations fail to evaluate the cost for some other human beings: those of future generations. The not-yet-born are either ignored or "discounted." The main reason for the latter is that these economists tend to discount the future: a value $x$ in the future is less than $x$ now, because it would be equal to the amount that $x$ would yield in this future if it were invested now and benefited from the interest rate. This, of course, is incompatible with any notion of intergenerational equity.

In addition to the above difficulties with the evaluation of the cost of environmental damages, there is a serious difficulty with the notion that serves the market advocates in their approach to this issue. They assume that all we have to do when we decide on environmental policies is ask people how much they will pay to conserve a forest, save the life of three whales, preserve a certain building, and so forth. Economists call this mechanism the WTP (willingness to pay) test.

But following psychological research that Amos Tversky and Danny Kahaneman conducted in the U.S.A. and Maya Bar-Hillel in Israel, I conducted a simple experiment that reveals the fallacy of the concept of WTP. I told a group of forty students that they should imagine that an ecological disaster has occurred, and that there is an urgent need to clean our country's coast. The first twenty students were given papers in which they were asked whether they would contribute 1% of their salaries this month to clean the coast. All of them replied positively. Then they were asked whether they thought it would be possible to know the average amount that their fellow students would be willing to pay. Ninety percent replied that it would be possible; the average WTP predicted was 1.85% of one's salary.

The second group of twenty students were told the same story, and yet they were asked whether they would be willing to pay 4% of their salaries. They all asserted that they would contribute this amount, and thought that the average WTP would be 6.16% of one's salary.

The results are clear: the concept of WTP reflects nothing about "individuals' autonomous wills." Rather we see that the format of the question and the starting point affect the WTP: Is there no consistent notion of WTP?

So I conducted a similar experiment. This time I told forty students that the department had decided to allow them to use our common room for their coffee breaks. Each student would contribute as much as he or she wishes, in order to run this "coffee shop." They were asked whether they would pay $6 a month. They all answered "yes." When asked about the WTP of their fellow students, their answers varied from $2 to $16 with the average of $7.42.

The second group of twenty students were given the same story, but were asked to contribute $30 a month. 20% agreed, whereas 80% disagreed. But the average evaluation of their fellow students' WTP was $15! My conclusion is that WTP is perhaps interesting, theoretically speaking, but it is not a reliable mechanism for revealing preferences.

It goes without saying that this technical question does not exhaust the discussion of the relationship of liberalism with environmental concern, but it does point to the difficulties with regard to the political and practical implications of liberalism in this context. And beyond all these difficulties with the "economic behavior" approach, there is—according to the critique of the market theory—another, perhaps greater, difficulty. This is the belief that individuals' economic behavior yields the best (sometimes defined in terms of being the most rational) results. Do such results include the difficulties that the people of Athens have in breathing every summer, because of traffic pollution? The problem with the market is that even if it corrects itself, it may be too late, because the damage—sometimes to humans—is irreversible.

Some market advocates answer that the question is not one of metaphysical beliefs, but rather of an ethical belief in the idea of freedom. Since they are aware of the environmental damages in our world, they have suggested that firms should be allowed to react in their own ways and according to their own methods to the changing needs of the market, including the need to be more environment-friendly. This, as Eckerstey notes, "is not simply a defense of economic efficiency; it is also linked to a defense of political freedom." Thus, for
example, if there must be less pollution, then a system of selling pollution rights should be introduced. Pollution rights will be distributed to firms if x is the degree of pollution that is tolerable, and n is the number of firms, each firm will get x/n pollution rights. Those who can continue manufacturing and limit the resulting pollution will do so, and cover the cost of doing so by selling pollution rights to other firms.\textsuperscript{55}

But while some firms adjust to the new circumstances by limiting pollution, others buy pollution rights, and the problem remains is the distribution of exposure to hazardous waste and pollution. Third world countries have long been disproportionately exposed to dangerous waste. For instance, in the 1970s it was quite common for African countries to "export" land to Western firms for burying toxic and radioactive waste. And in the Western world the poor find themselves unable to buy houses located in safer areas or to look for safer jobs. Even if taxes are introduced, those who find it most difficult to cope will be, again, the least advantaged.\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, why should we wait until the dirt is produced in order to clean it up? Why not prevent pollution before workers breathe in smog, or before people are hurt and the environment is damaged? Why should we let the private sector make the decisions on where to pollute? Are such decisions private at all? Should they be in the hands of those who run the industries and pollute rivers, meadows, and seas?

However, to some Greens and other advocates of the environmental case, the above approach seems too superficial and simplistic. In the final analysis, the world is not ready to give up any form of private initiative, or any expression of political freedom in the sphere of economics. The ultimate opposite to an economy that lacks any state action at all would be an economy lacking any profit-making motive, but many people doubt not only whether full state or public ownership is congruent with liberty, but also whether such a system is better for the environment. As Goodin notes, "the environmental consequences of public ownership in Western Europe do not serve as a happy precedent."\textsuperscript{57} Thus these people seek to modify, refine, or correct the market, to make it more environment-friendly. They do not reject all that liberalism stands for, but still think that if liberalism implies an "individuals' economic behavior" type of economics, then it is inadequate in the sense that it neglects aspects of ecology, wilderness preservation, and so on. The right question to be asked, these Greens argue, is not how to get rid of the market, but what sort of environmental goods it can deliver, and what it cannot.

The market economy, to start with, does not compensate or reward individuals and firms that do act to conserve the environment. A person who lives in an historic house and preserves it is not usually paid to do so. However, if she sells the house to a developer she may make a lot of money. Similarly, the capitalist who invests huge sums of money in order to recycle his or her industry's waste is not rewarded by his or her neighbor capitalist who pollutes the river that runs next to this industry.

Admittedly the market finds solutions to environmental problems: the quality of the water is bad, so we switch to drinking mineral water; there are no green spots left in town, so a farmer opens her land to the public, and we take our car, drive out into the country, and pay the farmer to enjoy nature; there is too much noise, so there are glass factories that offer us cheaper double windows. But the serious question remains: are we satisfied with these solutions? Is this what we wanted? Can we all afford them? And can the market, even if it does solve one or two problems, become the right solution to the ecological crisis in general?\textsuperscript{58}

Moreover, the market may suggest theoretical ways of coping with environmental damages; but can it enforce them? Pollution is a good example. All the more litter and a clean environment is a good that (almost) everybody wants. But some environmental goods (for example, leaving a remote forest untouched) are desired by only a part of the population. Individuals' economic behavior will not save this forest, because its economic value to timber merchants is much greater than the amount that some environmentalists are able to pay to save it for aesthetic reasons.\textsuperscript{59}

It seems that this list of goods that individuals' behavior cannot supply in the environmental context is quite long and includes some significant examples. So even if we accept the market as a system relevant to the "environmental era," there is still a strong need for "politics." In other words, we shall eventually realize that the economy is not a genuinely market one. But then, the pro-market economists fail not so much in their economic theory as in their political theory. Therefore, instead of dealing with the issue of a "market or non-market" economy, the right question to consider is that of the more suitable type of politics.

So I now want to return to this question, and argue that liberals must come to terms with the political fact that the need to promote environmental policies reveals: namely, that the state of the environment is closely related to our view of "the political" and the political process, including the debate over the good life, and that the issue of the environment involves the goals of our political life rather than merely the means of achieving certain goals.

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND LIBERALISM: CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICS

When discussing the inadequacy of liberalism's image of politics in the context of ecological policies, I must refer first to the impossibility of neutrality in the context of conservation or any other environmental policy.

The idea of neutrality, as advanced by many prominent liberal theorists, is that the state should stay out of the debate on the nature of the good. Official policies should not promote or reflect any conception of what constitutes the good life; on the contrary, the state should be indifferent to any discrepancies between those ideas. For example, while discussing distributive justice, Gauthier writes:
An essentially just society ... does not need to shape individuals in order to afford them justice. ... In saying that an essentially just society is neutral with respect to the aims of its members, we deny that justice is linked to any substantive conception of what is good, either for the individual or for society.42

But can one remain neutral in matters of conservation? A neutral argument in favor of conservation must make a fair political procedure the only criterion for choosing a policy. Suppose a liberal, it is argued, holds a belief about the importance of preservation. This person may hope that a way of life, which in one way or another is related to the environment (for example, to a beautiful forest), will be available to posterity. But this liberal fears that, owing to the destruction of the environment, this way of life will disappear. The destruction of natural objects is, in fact, destructive of the very possibility of certain competing ideas of the good life. The liberal fears that in the future one (that is future generations) may not be in a position to make a neutral choice amongst the ideas of the good life, now available.43

But this way of reasoning is misleading. If you and I are choosing between $x$ ideas and I assert that we should choose between $(x + 1)$ ideas, you will probably ask me why I insist upon idea $(x + 1)$. I cannot answer "because it exists," because then you may wonder why I do not advocate idea $(x + 2)$. I therefore have no other choice than to explain why $(x + 1)$ is especially desirable, significant, important and so forth. We wish posterity to enjoy a certain object precisely because it has been "desired and found satisfying in the past." Moreover, we do not preserve—indeed we sometimes try to destroy—what we think is wrong or bad, for example, nuclear weapons. Ironically, according to the above liberal argument we should conserve nuclear weapons—perhaps the idea of war itself as a way of life—so that future generations will be aware of it and have the opportunity to choose between a larger variety of ideas of the good. This, of course, is unwise, if not outrageous. In short, an argument in favor of the conservation of a certain object must be based on the claim that this object is in itself good, especially when conserving it contradicts the interests of certain people at the present time (for example, higher salaries, more jobs, and so on).

It is possible at this point to defend the "neutral liberal" stand by distinguishing between those things that are good in themselves, and those things that are instrumentally valuable, arguing that nuclear weapons fall into the latter category. Leaving aside the empirical question of whether or not there are people who regard nuclear weapons, or wars, as a good, this is exactly the point: "neutral" liberals usually find individuals' well-being the most proper—if not the only—moral basis for social policies. They then tend to define individuals' well-being in terms of satisfying personal individual wants, interpreted as those individuals' subjective wants. But they could have defined them according to objective wants (preferences a person would hold if (s)he were fully informed, not confused and rational).44 Otherwise it is enough to assume that there may be someone who thinks that wars are good to imply the preservation of this idea. We must therefore assert that wars are not good, but then we should do this according to objective wants. In other words, the challenge of the environment is such that objective wants should also be considered and well-being should be an account of final goods.

In the above liberal argument, however, the concept of neutrality is, in fact, derived from the more fundamental values of choice and autonomy, which are, it has been suggested, basic to American liberalism.45 The latter is therefore considered very democratically inasmuch as, according to its doctrines, political decisions should reflect nothing other than the aggregate of people's preferences, and respect their choices. For example, environmental policies are congruent with liberalism if and only if a majority (or a winning coalition) is in favor. Thus, private preferences and economic measures, backed by the legitimacy of "rational behavior," have supplanted the debate on political ideals and the image of the good life.46 This philosophy holds that society is an instrument for the benefit of individuals; all the more, therefore, should nature be subjugated by humans, who through its progressive transformation fulfill their individualistic desires.47 And according to this idea of politics, everything is reduced to private interests, which are held in balance of a market or exchange.48

But if there is any methodological innovation in Green philosophy it is that the wall between what has been considered nature or the environment on the side and culture on the other side falls. The concept of the environment becomes part of our culture, or political. Therefore it is repeatedly argued and widely accepted that what is now needed in environmental politics (which are more than the political discussion of environmental matters) is something more sophisticated: not merely policies that are responsive, whatever the individual preferences are or whatever the outcome may be, but policies that, while responsive, take into account the good of the community as a whole as well, and offer solutions to problems that are rarely considered, and, still less, resolved, by individualistic, self-involved, short-run interests.49 Moreover, there is a good chance that, in the environmental context, individual and private preferences will contradict the general good. Thus Jonathon Porritt writes:

There may well have been a time, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, when Adam Smith's assertion that the sum of individual decisions in pursuit of self-interest added up to a pretty fair approximation of public welfare, with the "invisible hand" of the market ensuring that individualism and the general interest of society were one and the same thing. But in today's crowded, interdependent world, these same individualistic tendencies are beginning to destroy our general interest and thereby harm us all [emphasis added].50

Indeed, economic and self-interested individualistic preferences could easily lead to the continuing depletion of scarce resources, be it oil, clean air, or scenic landscape. As Ted Schricker writes, the resistance of business to environmental regulations has been "bitter" and firms have fought "long and
expensive court battles to avoid conviction," sometimes issuing threats to shut
down firms.31

Garret Hardin's well-known "Tragedy of the Commons" demonstrates this
claim: according to him, the state of the environment resembles a pasture
open to all. Each herdsman tries to keep as many cattle on the common as
possible, but the carrying capacity of the land is insufficient. Each herdsman seeks
to improve his own position. If he asks himself the utility of adding one more
animal to his herd, he answers that the advantage is +1 (the herdsman receives
all the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal), whereas the disad-
vantage is only a fraction of -1 (the effects of overgrazing being shared by all
other herdsman). The tragedy, of course, is that all herdsman reach the same
conclusion. Further, the question of how to reduce, say, pollution on the roads,
illustrates the fact that environmental issues involve concepts of "public good," "
collective action," and "free rider," and that the state is needed to provide the
necessary solution: that is, environmental policies.

Thus, one must concede that "environmental imperatives are basically
matters of principle that cannot be bargained away in an economic fashion," and
that "not all of us think of ourselves primarily as consumers; many of us
regard ourselves as citizens as well." And as citizens we are concerned with
the public interest, or the good of the community rather than with our own
personal interests. As citizens, we have obligations that are not always com-
patible with our private preferences as individuals, and these obligations must
receive priority.

[The] cost-benefit analysis . . . prevents us from achieving a certain kind of self-
determination. . . . It prevents us from deciding who we are, not just what we
are. . . . There is a right and a wrong way to manage those national parks. . . . The
wrong thing to do is to make a big drive-in for Winnebagoes. This has nothing to
do with what turns a social profit or maximizes wealth. . . .

Many Greens claim that to live in rural areas, for instance, is "living
more in harmony with nature" than living in an urban jungle of cars and
industries.59 In other terms, these Greens may be arguing that there is less
alienation in village life, or none at all. So they actually claim that one sort of
life is better than another, or, in other words, constitutes the good life. Is it?
May they be kept poles apart, the Futurists and George Sorel thought that this
type of harmony was merely a form of degeneration and degradation.
Although I subscribe to the Greens' view here, this is not relevant to my pur-
pose. The point to be established is that a debate on whether this sort of life
is good is perfectly legitimate. One must realize that there is a debate here on
the idea of the good. In the final analysis, this should be obvious. Any Green
or counter-Green argument must make some assumption about the idea of
the good, since the argument rests on a theory of value, that is, on the idea
of an intrinsic, non-instrumental value.56 And such a theory of value is simply
a theory of the good.

Thus the state of the environment calls for politics of the common and
a debate on the good. At this point the objection might be raised that, all the
same, the Greens' environmental concern represents nothing but an individ-
ual's private preferences. The argument would be that the Greens' claim that
the world will be destroyed if their suggestions are not implemented is similar
to the warnings issued by an almost unknown candidate for the 1992 Ameri-
can presidential campaign, John Huglin, that if he were not elected and his
proposals not taken seriously, there would be a worldwide holocaust, or, more
seriously, any religious fanatic's prophecy, and his desire that we should all
attend churches, synagogues, mosques, and so on. Moreover—the argument
goes—a contractor's wish that a certain valley should be inhabited and de-
veloped (which is, for that matter, another private preference) is in no way in-
ferior to the environmentalist demand that all work should stop and the
beautiful valley should be preserved.

But this criticism is deceptive. With regard to the last point, the question
is not a matter of which standpoint is inferior or superior; both developers and
environmentalists express ideas of the good life, images of how this world
should be and how humans should live. They even sometimes use the same
arguments: for instance, developers put forward the psychological argument
that if there are more roads and more jobs, then people will be less tense. And
environmentalists argue that since tension is caused by noise, traffic, and the
fast rhythm of our lives, if we wish to reduce tension, we must limit growth,
build fewer roads, and so on. But the point is that these two programs are not
preferences that can be bargained over until a compromise is reached. The two
sides represent opposite conceptions of a good world, of what is and what is
not desirable.

Now with regard to the fanatics, the challenge is easily answered: envi-
nronmentalism is based on rational evaluation and scientific, empirical knowl-
edge, whereas religious fanatics do not appreciate such evaluations. Their
system is irrational in essence: the environmentalists, on the other hand, base
their call for change on scientific grounds and empirical—though controver-
sial—data. So environmentalists do not simply express private preferences, but
put forward ideas of the good, based on scientific knowledge and phrased in
moral terms.

The next question to ask, then, is the following: isn't there a price to pay
for the liberals' insistence on regarding politics as a matter of individuals'
autonomous decisions? There must be if it limits a consideration of the good
of the community, welfare policies, and so on. For the ecologist, politics must
provide the framework in which common and general interests are discussed
and protected, if not promoted.

We are speaking, then, of state intervention. Now many liberals would
argue that one can remain neutral with regard to the idea of the good, but
nonetheless advocate interventionism. You don't have to debate the nature of
the good in order to justify state intervention. The Rawlsian theory of justice
is neutral, it is argued, but is nevertheless in favor of state intervention. I sub-
scribe to the view that in fact Rawls cannot put forward the idea of interventionism without being committed to some idea of the good. This debate, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes it is sufficient to claim that even if Rawls (or any other liberal), basing himself on the idea of neutrality, does justify a certain kind of interventionism, it cannot be the one that suits the case of the environment. As we have seen, where the latter is concerned, interventionism is based on and justified by the debate on the good. Any less weighty reason for interventionism would not justify the dramatic policies that are necessary to deal with the ecological disasters with which we are faced nowadays and the political difficulties that accompany them. Indeed, if such dramatic policies were implemented without being based on a genuine debate concerning the good, they would turn out to be nothing more than what Ophuls fears they would be: that is, regulations imposed on a large section of the population without this section understanding why they are needed.

So although liberalism has been a fertile ground for environmental philosophy, it has a basic difficulty with regard to a public environmental policy and its justification: most liberals adhere to neutrality, and regard liberal-democratic politics primarily as a matter of concerning the wills of individuals, whereas environmental issues call for a politics of the common and consequently for interventionism.

Does this imply that liberal governments cannot tackle the environmental challenge? My argument is that if liberalism limits itself to a policy of neutrality and an aggregate of autonomous decisions, then it is likely to fail in this matter. Ecology implies state intervention, justified by a consideration of the common good, and hence abandoning neutrality as a justification for the liberal state and its policies. A sense of community is needed because in the environmental era social and environmental responsibilities should play a much more important role than self-interested profit-making motivation. If we do not wish to retreat to totalitarian regimes, we must take the opportunity that liberalism as a philosophy provided (as I argued in the first part of this article), and look for a liberalism that is more social: the politics of the aggregate of autonomous decisions and an economics of individuals' preferences are of little benefit. The politics of the common, however, that at the same time does not arbitrarily restrict liberties, can be found in the other, perhaps so far more neglected, tradition of liberalism accompanied by a strong welfare state. This conception of liberalism could, perhaps, allow for a justification of environmental policies in terms of liberal terminology, and is therefore much better suited to the environmental era.

NOTES


4. Throughout this essay I give a very broad and flexible interpretation of liberalism, both in a historical sense (I refer to the liberals of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries) and in an analytical sense.


8. The latter is Ronald Dworkin’s formula. See his "Reverse Discrimination" in his Taking Rights Seriously (London: Duckworth, 1981), and his "Liberalism" in his A Matter of Principle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). But see also John Locke ("This equality of men by Nature . . . [is] so evident in itself, and beyond all question . . .", in his Second Treatise of Government, chap. II, 5), the French first declaration of the rights of man and of citizens ("Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect to their rights"), the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man, and Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (since everyone is equal, no one is entitled to be a despotic ruler: part II, chap. 10).


21. Consider, for instance, the damage being caused by all nations to the ozone layer, the problem of acid rain, or the contamination of the Mediterranean Sea. For a further discussion of the international aspects see G. Porter and J. Brown, Global Environmental Change (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); R.E. Benedick, Ozone Diplomacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); the Brundtland report, Brundtland Gro Harlem et al., The World Commission on Environment and Development (London: Earthscan, 1987); and M. Grubb et al., The Earth Summit Agreements (London: Earthscan, 1993).


31. It is interesting to note that John Stuart Mill already thought this could be a solution to air pollution. See Principles of Political Economy (New York: The Collier Press, 1900), p. 7.


35. See Robyn Eckersley, op. cit., p. 519. Some market advocates suggested that future generations' interests are, in fact, represented in any social arrangement that is decided upon now. See David Gauthier, Morals By Agreement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 299. I argue elsewhere that bargaining with the not yet born is impossible, not only literally, but also theoretically. See my Why Pasture Matters (London: Routledge, 1994).


38. See the statement issued by the Centre for Science and Environment (New Delhi) on global environmental democracy, as a reaction to the "northern agenda," in Alternatives 17 (1986): 271–79. Also see J. Mobeg, "Who Rules the Market," Political Studies 40 (1992): 357.


41. This is related to the question of whether only use value should count, or whether consumption value is, whether I can use and enjoy this environmental good in the future) counts as well. See Alan Randall, "Human Preferences, Economics, and the Preservation of Species," in B. Norton, ed., The Preservation of Species (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).


43. This rationale is put forward in Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," op. cit., p. 202.


54. For example, see Robert Goodin, Green Political Theory, p. 51.


56. Indeed, it seems that the state "has generally been the only institution with the necessary resources to provide environmental policies." K. Walker, "The State in Environmental Management," Political Studies 37 (1989): 25–38.


60. I would like to thank David Miller and my students in the Environmental Ethics seminar for their comments.

Socialism and Ecology*

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The premise of red green political action is that there is a global ecological and economic crisis; that the ecological crisis cannot be resolved without a radical transformation of capitalist production relationships; and that the economic crisis cannot be resolved without an equally radical transformation of capitalist productive forces. This means that solutions to the ecological crisis presuppose solutions to the economic crisis and vice versa. Another a priori of red green politics is that both sets of solutions presuppose an ecological socialism.

The problem is that socialism in theory and practice has been declared "dead on arrival." In theory, post-Marxist theorists of radical democracy are completing what they think is the final autopsy of socialism. In practice, in the North, socialism has been banalized into a species of welfare capitalism. In Eastern Europe, the moment for democratic socialism seems to have been missed over 20 years ago and socialism is being overthrown. In the South, most socialist countries are introducing market incentives, reforming their tax structures, and taking other measures that they hope will enable them to find their niches in the world market. Everywhere market economy and liberal democratic ideas on the right, and radical democratic ideas on the left, seem to be defeating socialism and socialist ideas.

Meanwhile, a powerful new force in world politics has appeared, an ecology or green movement that puts the earth first and takes the preservation of the ecological integrity of the planet as the primary issue. The simultaneous rise of the free market and the greens together with the decline of socialism suggests that capitalism has an ally in its war against socialism. This

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