

## Green Ethics and the Democratic Left

A paper in *Soundings* 35 (2007) 66-75

### Patrick Curry

Can there be anyone who is still unaware that we – that is, the Earth and all its inhabitants – are now embroiled in a crisis which is only going to intensify, and whose end is not in sight? True, there is not a complete consensus on its severity. (When was there ever a complete consensus on anything important?) But at the very least, the deteriorating situation respecting not only climate change but pollution, the loss of wild habitat through development, and the catastrophic fall in biodiversity should be deeply disquieting. Given human powers of denial, it might also be worth pointing out that no other planet is currently, or foreseeably, available.

So it is no longer a question of *why* ‘the environment’ should concern politics and the left, but *how* it does. The point of this article is to sketch some answers. To some extent, I am following on from Noel Castree’s excellent earlier contribution, although my position is more radical and therefore ultimately (I would argue) more realistic.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, the very word ‘environment’ is not a good place to start. Its meaning (‘that which surrounds’) already relegates the natural world to something whose primary if not only point is to support and showcase ‘us’; and such an attitude is itself, as I hope to show, part of the problem. For this reason, I prefer ‘ecology’ – as long as we refuse scientific ownership, and accept that it has other equally important dimensions, from political to psychological-spiritual.

One apparently reasonable response might be to simply (so to speak) add ecology to the more traditional concerns of the left: social justice, equality between the sexes, democratic rights, the elimination of poverty and so on. I will argue instead that ecology must be absolutely integral to any left politics with viability and integrity. Then I will offer a few suggestions as to what the resulting formation would ideally be like. One hint follows already from the concerns I have just mentioned – which are, please notice, all exclusively concerned with human beings. Such exclusivity is no longer defensible, either substantively or strategically. It is, in fact, *another form of destructive prejudice*; and as such, it has no place on the left.

### The Earth: An Optional Extra?

Perhaps as a consequence of dealing with such a comprehensive phenomenon, when human beings’ attention spans, in various ways, are relatively limited, people trying to get ecology onto the agenda often find themselves obliged to point out embarrassingly obvious if inconvenient points. For example: the existential fact that everything which human beings do, need and want is made possible by the Earth. I mean in a primary and fundamental sense; for us, it’s a case of: no Earth, no anything. And given that our biological constitution is far from infinitely elastic – even granted its

---

<sup>1</sup> Noel Castree, “The Future of Environmentalism”, *Soundings*, 1997, pp. 89-101.

technological extensions and our extraordinary adaptability – such provision must be within certain ranges as well.

Next, there is the political point which follows: any progressive programme, for *anything* (from food and housing to education, rights of any kind, etc.), depends utterly upon a sufficiently healthy ecology. Now granting this, it might nonetheless be objected, ‘Ok, but why can’t we just assume that and get on with what we are really supposed to be doing?’ But obviously, again, such a thing can no longer be assumed. And even short of relatively utter ecological disaster, how could collapsing “resources” – not just less of them but what remains being damaged and possibly damaging – fail to jeopardize the goods, from the most material to the most cultural, which the left wants to encourage?

Admitting that the left must therefore involve itself with ecology, however, still seems to leave open the reluctant add-on option, with its instrumentalism: nature is not really our proper concern, but we must pay some attention to it because otherwise we won’t be able to do the other things the left should be doing. But this is just where green ethics makes itself felt. As I have already suggested, there are cogent reasons why ecology should be central to the politics of the democratic left.

### **Substantively**

Take biodiversity. The sixth great mass extinction in the Earth’s history is now taking place, with species of life disappearing at a rate of between 1,000 and 10,000 times faster than the background rate of the preceding 60 million years. But the difference between the other five and this one is that it is being driven by one species: us. This is colonialism with a vengeance. (And let me remind you that the loss of a species is a kind of ultimate death, because there will never again be any of that kind.)

Or consider the recent conclusion of the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the U.N. (reported on 6.12.06), that the richest 1% of adults in the world own 40% of the planet’s financial wealth, in conjunction with another fact: the human species constitutes about 0.5% of the world’s total biomass, yet – exactly like some bloated ruling-class which lives by exploiting those ‘below’ – it currently expropriates between 20 and 25% of the total net terrestrial photosynthetic energy, not to mention about 50% of its accessible fresh-water run-off.

Surely the all-too-recognizable resonances of this kind of behaviour ought to make the most hardened democratic leftist pause before replying, ‘Sorry, but it doesn’t matter’, or, ‘Not our problem.’ If, however broadly, ‘left’ = ‘progressive’, and if ‘democratic’ means recognizing the right of those with lives to live them, so far as possible, as they wish, how progressive and democratic would such a response be?

The belief that other animals, lacking language, are therefore not subjects of their own lives which (not who) cannot really know or suffer – are in fact, to borrow Descartes’s icy phrase, *bêtes machines* – is patently special pleading of the kind sometimes described as ‘speciesism’.<sup>2</sup> (The same is true, incidentally, of those who would deny moral consideration to non-human animals since they lack rational moral agency; presumably they would then agree to withdrawing such consideration from children, the senile, the insane, the mentally handicapped and so on...) However, the term for the more comprehensive attitude that only humanity has value, and is therefore uniquely privileged, is ‘anthropocentrism’. And as I have already said, it is

---

<sup>2</sup> The term is used by Peter Singer but was first coined in 1973 by Richard Ryder.

nothing more or less than a prejudice, akin to those poisoning gender, class and race; or, from another perspective, another version of sectarianism.

### **Pseudo-problems**

Let me address two common misunderstandings. One is the tediously simple-minded objection that ‘Of course all value is human; we are humans.’ But the former (that humans exhaust value) by no means follows from the latter (that in this case, humans do the valuing). The second is the inference that to criticize anthropocentrism is also to attack a healthy and non-exclusive appreciation of human value. It isn’t, and there is a perfectly good word for that – albeit somewhat tarnished in recent centuries by the highly exclusive technodolatry of the ‘On to Mars!’ sort – namely ‘humanism’.<sup>3</sup>

A more subtle rear-guard action has been mounted by adherents of the late Murray Bookchin under the aegis of ‘social ecology’.<sup>4</sup> Briefly, Bookchin pointed out that not all humans either contribute equally to or benefit equally from the exploitation of the Earth and its other inhabitants. This is undeniably true. It does not follow, however, that there is no prejudice or ideology of anthropocentrism such that only humans – and in principle, all humans – have intrinsic value; nor that such a belief, when inculcated, institutionalised and enforced, does not have tremendous destructive power.

Bookchin also maintained that the sources of ecological crisis lay entirely within the human realm; that is, that human maltreatment of nature follows completely from human maltreatment of other humans. Now the two are clearly and commonly related, but to identify the latter as entirely the cause of the former is as implausible as the reverse would be.

Hence there is an urgent need, not least for the democratic left, to recognize and admit another kind of value which is more-than-human:<sup>5</sup> the value of the natural world including *both* non-human and human nature. The term for this is ‘ecocentrism’. Of course I can only introduce this subject here, so what follows is only a sketch.<sup>6</sup>

### **‘Light-green’ or ‘Shallow’ Ethics**

This kind of ethics, being anthropocentric, views non-human nature as possessing only instrumental value. In other words, it has value only insofar as it enables humans to survive and flourish. This is the ethics of managerialism or, in theistic terms, stewardship. It has its place – some nonhuman nature survives on sufferance – but that place is not the almost unquestioned dominance it now exercises. In the UK, for example, it rules not only city and local planning offices everywhere but stretches from the newly ‘green’ Conservative Party and corporate boardrooms (themselves sometimes slightly in advance of the current Labour government: what a sad comment to have to make!) across the spectrum to the Green Party itself, wherein socialism,

---

<sup>3</sup> See David Ehrenfeld’s still-powerful *The Arrogance of Humanism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981. The flight to Mars was recently embraced by Stephen Hawking.

<sup>4</sup> Not all social ecologists are such adherents; see the work of Jonathan Clark for an intelligent and interesting exception.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is David Abram’s, from *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York, Random House, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Please see my recent book *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, Polity Press 2006, for an introduction of more length and depth.

feminism, anti-racism etc. can certainly be found, but very little concern for non-human nature *for its own sake*.

That is what ecocentrism entails: a respect, legitimately extending to reverence, for non-human nature as much as humanity, for its *intrinsic* value rather than as an instance of that oxymoron, enlightened self-interest. For the purer self-interest is the more it is, precisely, unenlightened. By the same token, I think Castree is in danger of putting too much hope in “social democratic greens”, unless they are seriously pressured, at least, by a deep or dark-green green movement which will virtually need to avoid mainstream institutionalization in order to escape cooption and neutralization.

### **‘Mid-green’ or ‘Intermediate’ Ethics**

This ethics is definitely an advance. It involves recognizing that some natural items, so to speak, have intrinsic value. But that value is limited to certain individuals and usually predicated on the assumption that where there is a clash of interests, non-human value will have to give way to human. The principal exemplars of this attitude are animal liberation (initiated by Peter Singer), animal rights (principally articulated by Tom Regan) and wildlife conservation. And the movements growing out of this work, addressing the appalling inhumanity of the way humans treat other animals: outright murder for wild animals, slaughter for those we want (but in the vast majority of cases do not need) to eat, work-camps for those whose products we use, torture (from the animals’ point of view) for those selected for research for our benefit. So it can only be applauded by anyone who cares at all about unnecessary suffering.

The weakness of intermediate ethics, however, is the other side of its strength: it is confined to individual animals. That emphasis provides a ready focus for empathy and compassion; as has been remarked, “It is easier to empathize with the deer in the field, than the field the deer is in.”<sup>7</sup> By the same token, however, such ethics cannot defend wholes such as species or, perhaps even more crucially, places or ecosystems. And the deer depends more on the field than the field does on the deer (or us).

### **‘Dark-green’ or ‘Deep’ Ethics**

For that, a fully ecocentric ethics is needed. It must therefore be able to (1) recognize and defend the value of not only individuals, human and non-human, but species and ecosystemic places; and (2) allow for conflicts between the interests of humans and non-human nature, and the real possibility of some in which the former *should* lose. That is both because there are instances where our ignorance, including of long-term consequences for all concerned, mean that the precautionary principle should obtain; and because there are cases where the human interests are indefensible against those of nature. (Destroying old-growth forests for cardboard, concrete supports and toilet-paper comes to mind, not to mention with razing tropical rainforests to grow and sell soybeans as animal feed to transnational fast food companies: the current practice encouraged by that hero of the left, President Lula da Silva.)

There are various schools of deep green ethics which cannot receive the critical attention they deserve (and sometimes need) here: Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic,

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, *The Greening of Ethics: From Human Chauvinism to Deep-Green Theory*, Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1994, p.85.

Deep Ecology (inspired by Arne Naess and, in America, George Sessions and Bill Devall), the critical version developed by the unjustly neglected Australian philosopher Richard Sylvan, and, although it is not overtly concerned with ethics, James Lovelock's Gaia Theory. Also important is the flourishing work of eco-feminists such as Ariel Salleh, Val Plumwood and Vandana Shiva (among others), the implications of which extend far beyond their nominal boundaries.

Another approach should be of particular interest to democratic leftists. It is Left Biocentrism, a collective network of thoughtful activists who are connected by agreement with a primer of points emphasizing the inseparability of leftism and ecocentrism. Left Biocentrists recognizes that given the primacy of ecosystemic health (as I began by mentioning), any progressive politics must acknowledge it not only as the horizon of what is possible but as what must take first place in any specific instances of direct conflict. From this perspective, for example, socialism is (ideally!) the more humane end of a spectrum with capitalism at the other, the *whole* of which – industrialism – is fatally flawed by its anthropocentrism.<sup>8</sup> Again, “sustainable growth” is exposed as oxymoronic wishful thinking: on a finite planet, *growth* is simply not indefinitely sustainable. Nor, for the same reason, are workers' rights regardless of the effects of their work; nor, for that matter, women's reproductive rights regardless of the impact of that great unmentionable, human overpopulation.<sup>9</sup> The rejection of any limits *in principle* to the satisfying of human desires is a sure sign of anthropocentrism. Yet this is the logic - and, writ large, ideology - of the cancer cell.

Every position has its dangers, of course. The chief one here is obviously misanthropy. But it certainly does not follow automatically from ecocentrism, which recognizes the rightful place of humans – entities just as natural as any other – in the much vaster more-than-human world. (I would like to point out, too, just how very rare misanthropic ecocentrism is, as opposed to lethal anthropocentrism.) More common is simply despair, an occupational hazard today for anyone who values non-human as well human well-being.

It also needs saying that all three ethics are valuable in appropriate situations; they do not progressively replace each other. But the last is as valid as the other much more familiar ones, on pain of arbitrarily closing the gates of compassion and intelligence to the undeserving. We've tried that, and we know where it leads.

## **Strategically**

There are also powerful strategic reasons for ecocentrism – namely, that without it, a healthy humanity, and all the more so a progressive politics, faces a very bleak future. To put it another way, if the health of the Earth's non-human natural ecosystems is approached with anthropocentric ethics alone, it will fail. The reason is not hard to find: endemic human susceptibility to short-term and narrow perspectives, largely dictated by perceived self-interest and easily corrupted by greed – which, of course, is just what commodity capitalism is so expert at exploiting and orchestrating.

The paradox is this: to the extent that human beings take a genuine interest in non-human nature, and enable it to survive and flourish, success will enable their own flourishing far beyond what self-interest could accomplish.

There are other vital strategic considerations which will undoubtedly raise excite some leftist reflexes. One is that science alone cannot save either us or nature.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew McLaughlin, *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> For a fairly thorough analysis of the arguments here, see chapter 12 of my *Ecological Ethics*.

Anyone who thinks science is still principally about disinterested inquiry into the nature of reality stopped paying attention quite a while ago, when it became several other things as well: (1) inextricably entangled with hypermodern technology and at the same time (2) thoroughly enmeshed with transnational capital and political state power, as the three big gears of the engine of modernity; and as such, (3) a major extension of anthropocentric ‘rational’ self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

### **Post-Secularism**

There is also the point that humanity is – as civic republicans from Aristotle onwards, being realists, have realized – a religious animal. Only such a fantasist as Richard Dawkins could think mass secularism was a real option. Dogmatic secularism, by disowning this portion of human life, simply has the counter-productive effect of handing it over to those who are keen to exploit it for their own political ends (which are equally anthropocentric!).

In contrast to this dead-end – still the position of choice on the socialist and social-democratic left – a left ecocentrism must be able to accommodate the perception that more-than-nature, by virtue of its intrinsic value, has an inalienably spiritual dimension; that is, one which outruns all considerations of use and particularly use organized for the purpose of profit. For the same reason, any defence of nature which is based on rational or scientific grounds *alone* is doomed to fail. Not only will it be weak and corruptible as I have noted, but successful resistance requires the passion that the apprehension of value as ultimate generates.

But note that we are not talking here about an essentialized nature in the abstract, because that is already to hand it over to its enemies. Ecocentrism must proceed on the basis of particularities: sensuous, perceptible instances of nature which need defending or extending, even if noticing and valuing them needs encouragement and education.

### **Pluralism**

Another key point about a democratic left which has taken green ethics on board is that it must do so in a spirit of genuine pluralism. Probably nothing has done more to undermine the ability of the left to achieve progressive goals *in practice* than its residual commitment to the monism of a single and universal truth, whose lineage from Christianity through Hegel to Marx is unmistakable. Laclau and Mouffe are correct when they remark that “This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal, and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’, which can only be reached by a limited number of subjects.”<sup>11</sup>

The point applies with no less force to the subject at hand. A programme which tried to replace God or Truth with Nature (whether mystical or scientific) would – to the precise extent it was a ‘success’ – be a disaster for the Earth and, to that enormous extent, us; only this time, it would be in the name of ecocentrism! Consistent moral as well as metaphysical pluralism is the only prophylactic against such an outcome. That requires us to acknowledge the irreducible complexity of life

<sup>10</sup> See Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, London, Routledge, 2001; and the work, by no means outdated, of the late Paul Feyerabend, as well as more recent science studies.

<sup>11</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985: 191-2. Cf. much of Stuart Hall’s work to the same effect.

and its multiplicity of perspectives.<sup>12</sup> The result is not the ‘anything goes’ of vulgar relativism but an intelligent engagement with the situation, in which those making assertions take responsibility for them, including their particularity, rather than hiding behind so-called universal truth.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Hard Work**

This brings us back to our starting-point in the form of another paradox: while it may be an obvious and fundamental truth that everything depends upon a liveable Earth, which must therefore take pride of place in any politics, it cannot be treated as self-evident. Rather that point must be argued, publicized, and fought for all the way. There is no avoiding the hard work of politics, campaigning and education to *make* it real; nor that of cobbling together unstable and impermanent alliances in order for that to work. And some of those alliances will necessarily involve compromises between deep green ethics and the shallower kinds, even straightforwardly anthropocentric ones. But, I have argued, without a regulative horizon of deep green ethics, a democratic left politics will fail. And that failure will make it all the easier for ecocentrism to be captured by the right and articulated to a set of reactionary and authoritarian discourses. This possibility is surely already plain to see.

The goal, then, is to enable and encourage green citizenship, based on a green virtue ethics. As that term implies, the tradition of civic republicanism has a great deal to teach us. So too, in a complementary way, does feminism, with its ethic of care. But now, rather than being confined to human beings, the challenge is to reorient both traditions in relation to an ecological common good. Ecofeminism has already made a good start, and so too has Left Biocentrism. But the democratic left as a whole lags far behind. And how long have we got?

---

<sup>12</sup> See Mary Midgley, “Sustainability and Moral Pluralism”, in T.D.J. Chappell (ed.), *The Philosophy of the Environment*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997, pp. 89-101.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Laclau and Mouffe, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1997.