Western environmentalism today: paradoxes, problems and challenges

Noel Castree
University of Wollongong, ncastree@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
Western environmentalism today: paradoxes, problems and challenges

Abstract
It's forty years since the birth of the modern environmental movement in the West and beyond. After a thrilling late 1960s infancy and a rather successful 1970s adolescence, the movement should have enjoyed an early adulthood full of achievement. Yet its development was thoroughly arrested as the 1980s gave way to the 90s. For many environmentalists, the apparent greening of governments, firms and consumers after the first Earth Summit was simply a sham. For instance, veteran American campaigner Tom Athanasiou (1996) regarded Rio and its aftermath as little more than "a long flatulence". Fifteen years on, however, there are suddenly signs of renewal globally, but especially in the world's most powerful states. Western politicians and their publics seem preoccupied with environmental issues to a degree not witnessed since the first Earth Day and the early campaigns of Greenpeace. Is this, then, a moment when Western environmentalists can continue a journey so rudely interrupted by the likes of Reagan and Thatcher?

Keywords
today, paradoxes, challenges, problems, western, environmentalism

Disciplines
Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/944
Western environmentalism today: paradoxes, problems and challenges

Is environmentalism a difference that makes a difference? Gregory Bateson

It’s forty years since the birth of the modern environmental movement in the West and beyond. After a thrilling late 1960s infancy and a rather successful 1970s adolescence, the movement should have enjoyed an early adulthood full of achievement. Yet its development was thoroughly arrested as the 1980s gave way to the 90s. For many environmentalists, the apparent greening of governments, firms and consumers after the first Earth Summit was simply a sham. For instance, veteran American campaigner Tom Athanasiou (1996) regarded Rio and its aftermath as little more than “a long flatulence”.1 Fifteen years on, however, there are suddenly signs of renewal globally, but especially in the world’s most powerful states. Western politicians and their publics seem preoccupied with environmental issues to a degree not witnessed since the first Earth Day and the early campaigns of Greenpeace. Is this, then, a moment when Western environmentalists can continue a journey so rudely interrupted by the likes of Reagan and Thatcher?

It’s too soon to tell, of course. And in any case, liberal environmentalists may think there’s little need for change, given how their own policies have become common-sense from LA to London. But the signs are auspicious for greens of a less avowedly free-market persuasion, be they reformers or radicals. Consider the following facts. Tony Blair has repeatedly made climate change a headline issue in his third term and appointed a possible Labour leader of tomorrow (David Miliband) as Environment Secretary. David Cameron (of the Arctic) has based a renewal of British conservatism on a partly green platform, while prime-minister-in-waiting Gordon Brown has tried to prevent Cameron stealing the environmental agenda in his own bid to renew New Labour. In the United States, the ‘peak oil’ question has caused even George Bush to reconsider his attachment to the petrochemical way-of-life – though he is far from emulating Jacques Chirac’s 2004 attempt to get environmental rights written into the French Constitution. Even Al Gore, failed presidential candidate, has staged a political comeback of sorts on the back of his green credentials. And who’d have thought that a documentary about flightless birds (March of the Penguins) would captivate cinema audiences in Europe and

beyond? Finally, we can’t ignore the large public appetite for books on nature’s
despoilation. Not since the days of Carson, Commoner, Schumacher and Ehrlich have
environmental authors had such a ready audience. Quite simply, the likes of Lester
Brown, Rory Spowers, Jared Diamond, Colin Tudge and Jonathan Porritt sell crate-loads
of books these days.

Environmentalists are, of course, accustomed to false dawns. But let us assume, for
argument’s sake, that 2006 really does mark the beginning of an historic opportunity to
green Western society. How can environmentalists’ capitalise on this opportunity? The
answer, of course, depends what kind of environmentalists we’re talking about.
Environmentalism remains a divided movement, its main parts united only in name. Like
most readers of Soundings, my own hope is that the green left can win the arguments
within both the environmental movement itself and the wider society. By the ‘green left’
I mean social democrats in the environmental mainstream (like Jonathan Porritt) and
radicals outside it (namely, most social ecologists and a few non-misanthropic deep
ecologists) who must battle it out with liberal and conservative environmentalists
respectively. Naturally, the prospects for the green left to grow its influence vary from
country to country. But the strategic starting point for all environmentalists opposed to
the eco-liberal orthodoxy is a realistic assessment of how their cause is currently viewed
within mainstream politics, the world of business and the public domain. Such an
assessment shows Western environmentalism to be a movement of paradoxes in which it
appears to exert real societal influence while in practice being mostly ineffectual. Let me
explain.

Paradoxes apparent and real
I stated above that environmentalism (its liberal version excepted) has suffered a defeat
in the years leading up to today’s possible chance for renewal. Strangely, however, that
defeat was not coincident with environmental issues disappearing from debates in the
spheres of government, business or civil society. On the contrary, ‘green talk’ has
abounded since the very moment when its most successful advocates (like Greenpeace)
lost their momentum in the 80s. Most environmentalists today thus find their movement
to be paradoxical in at least three ways.
The first paradox is that environmental issues have been ‘on the agenda’ of ruling Western parties even in the post-Thatcher, post-Reagan era, but in a way most ‘real’ environmentalists wouldn’t recognise. As American geographer Neil Smith expressed it back in 1998, “We’re all environmentalists now. The radical genie of the environmental challenge … has been stuffed back into the bottle of institutional normality just in time to calm millennial jitters about nature” (p. 272). Even in Germany, where the green party remains comparatively strong, the sting of environmentalist criticism was drawn long ago. This is why an aspiring prime minister like Cameron can do photo-ops on melting glaciers and yet advocate a raft of otherwise environmentally costly policies. And it’s why his immediate future rival, Gordon Brown, can make a speech about global warming’s challenge to humanity while having made only very modest steps, as Chancellor, to alter the ecological footprint of the average Briton.

The second, related paradox has been captured by German sociologist Klaus Eder: “The environmental movement”, he observes, “no longer dominates the discourse on the environment” (1996: 203). What he means by this is that while environmental chatter proliferates in Western societies – think of all the newspaper print devoted to issues like climate change, GMOs, and charismatic megafauna – it’s long been appropriated by institutions and actors that, historically, have had few green credentials. The symbolic beginning of this switch of discursive ownership was probably Margaret Thatcher’s 1988 speech to the Royal Society (soon followed by Bush Snr’s notorious claim that he was ‘the environmental President’). It was a precursor to the ‘environmentalism lite’ now so typical of elected governments and corporations.

The final, and again related, paradox is that Western publics generally care about the environment and yet fail to act on their convictions. Poll after poll indicates a more-or less-strong environmental sensibility according to a person’s gender, class, ethnicity and religious faith. Yet most of us are very obliging consumers of metals, petrochemicals, wood-products and much else besides, while purchasing ethical absolution courtesy of organic carrots, free-range eggs or Fair Trade coffee. It’s perfectly possible, it seems, for certain ideas and values to be popular without this popularity translating into concrete

---

action or reigning-in otherwise contradictory behaviour. The big word for this is a 'velleity': a desire that falls short of an action.

To summarise, it’s plausible to suggest that Western environmentalism today has many supporters but little purchase, lots of popularity but little power, many advocates but few serious practitioners. Put differently, the kind of liberal environmentalism favoured for years in many Western states is but a pale shadow of what most environmentalists would wish for. Of course, Western environmentalism’s current situation is not really paradoxical or surprising at all. Instead, it’s entirely explicable for both structural and contingent reasons. Structurally, any radical body of thought tends always to exert influence only by being assimilated to the prevailing order. As a mostly oppositional and predominantly left-wing discourse emerging in the 60s, modern environmentalism was never likely to realise its greatest ambitions, even with a fair wind. On the issue of contingencies, it so happened that modern environmentalism’s second decade – when it should have been growing its influence in the political and economic mainstream – coincided with the return of conservative and neoliberal politics in key Western countries like the US. This stymied its latent potential for relatively high impact on politicians, firms and publics. And it led to the language of environmentalism being coopted to the cause of a specifically liberal, market-led form of environmental management in key Western states.

With hindsight we can see that, from the early 1980s, ruling parties saw it as in their interests to appropriate the language of environmentalism, but only the practical policies of its least threatening versions. The victories that some left-wing environmentalists secured during the 1970s heyday – courtesy of then new campaign organisations like Earth First! – meant that by the 1980s they were far too visible to be entirely dismissed by their opponents. The latter’s solution to this problem was to adopt the terminology of the greens, while advancing a specifically liberal kind of environmentalism congenial to the free market orthodoxy that Thatcher, Bush and others entrenched in major Western democracies. This brand of environmentalism, with its emphasis on markets, eco-taxes, the exercise of consumer conscience, and voluntary codes for firms, is now de rigueur worldwide – even if its future is by no means assured.

Problems to be addressed
Given the seemingly paradoxical situation in which Western environmentalism finds itself – its liberal component excepted – what are the immediate problems to be tackled in order that a wider societal influence be exerted? As already noted, environmentalists are not all of a piece. This means that the barriers to influence vary depending on what kind of environmentalism we’re dealing with. Three environmentalisms are today well established in Western countries, albeit in very different arenas and with varying degrees of popularity. What I earlier called ‘the green left’ cross-cuts two of these.

First, there is ‘mainstream’ environmentalism, which has a social democratic, a conservative and (as noted) a currently dominant liberal branch. In essence, mainstream environmentalism is reformist and favours incremental change within the parameters of a global capitalist system based on limitless economic growth, inter-firm competition, and mass consumption. It finds its home in many professional environmental charities, foundations and NGOs; in mainstream politics (where green political parties remain very marginal); and in members of the public who enjoy a Western way of life but wish to temper its worst ecological consequences. Within the academic world, its proselytisers are ‘industrial ecologists’, ‘ecological modernisers’, environmental economists and some reform-minded ecological economists.

By contrast, ‘social ecology’ and ‘deep ecology’ are radical forms of environmentalism that currently lie outside the political-economic and cultural mainstream. They are largely, but by no means exclusively, left-leaning and are strongly embedded in grass-roots movements as well as a few more institutionalised outfits like the Sea Shepherds. Social ecology combines a substantive concern for ‘environmental sustainability’ with an equal concern for social justice: hence the Spanish activist and academic Joan Martinez-Alier has famously called it ‘an environmentalism of the poor’. Deep greens, while often using the language of social justice, are more concerned with ecological justice: for them nature has rights that must be respected. In some cases, this respect for nature verges on misanthropy and an almost total blindness to issues of social justice – giving deep ecology its (in)famous illiberal, authoritarian colouration. Intellectually, the two radical camps are sustained by contributions from professional philosophers, political theorists, environmental sociologists and radical ecological economists like Martinez-Alier. Not surprisingly, fundamentalists of both persuasions have been labelled ‘crackpots’ by

---

Western politicians, the mainstream press and most members of the public. Their vision of a post-capitalist, post-industrial society of equality – between people, and between people and nature – strays too far beyond the perimeters of ‘common-sense’ to be tenable or credible. In sum, social and deep ecologists wish to make their current radicalism the conventional wisdom of tomorrow, in the process exposing mainstream environmentalism’s shallowness.

Clearly, it is the social democratic and conservative positions within the environmental mainstream that have the greatest chance of unsettling the liberal orthodoxy today. The reason, quite simply, is that their agendas are less threatening than those of their more radical bretheren. They thus have a fighting chance of becoming more entrenched in the key spheres of conventional politics, business activity and public life. Even so, it will be no easy task for either of them to take advantage of whatever opportunities the current historical moment offers. Meanwhile, it would be wrong to think that social ecology and deep ecology are so peripheral that they have no meaningful role to play in helping to radicalise the environmental mainstream in a left or right direction. With these comments in mind, it’s worth considering several potential problems that non-liberal environmentalists currently face in advancing their agendas. Though what I have to say applies across the whole spectrum of non-liberal environmental positions, I am particularly concerned with social democrats in the mainstream and social ecologists outside it. Together, they hold out the promise of a future socio-environmental order that avoids the biocentrism of much deep ecology, the elitist anti-modernity of green conservatism, and the manifest injustices of liberal environmentalism. But to make social and ecological justice the conjoint common-sense of the future there is hard work ahead. Whatever opportunities the current conjuncture affords environmentalists of a left-wing persuasion will count for little without some major logistical and strategic changes to their *modus operandi* – as I will now explain.

1. The first problem to be confronted concerns the message that environmentalists outside the liberal orthodoxy wish to convey. Even in the non-liberal mainstream, environmentalism is about much more than a thing called ‘the environment’. This important fact is starting to be widely recognised, in part because of effective media reporting of the wider implications of so-called ‘environmental problems’. Even so, too many politicians, CEOs and citizens regard ‘green issues’ as somehow separate from
other domains of life. This way of thinking is what permits many people to salve their conscience by consuming products from The Nature Company while driving their children to school in a Range Rover. Environmental issues are, in essence, a vehicle for posing the profound human question: ‘how should we live?’ As the debates on energy shortages and climate change increasingly show, so-called ‘environmental’ and ‘resource’ questions are really questions about lifestyles, industrialism, capitalism as an economic system, and much more besides. They are also questions about the global consequences of our local actions and concomitant transnational responsibilities. Liberal environmentalism tends to frame the environmental debate in terms of discrete ‘problems’ that need to be ‘managed’ (preferably through the rational exercise of ‘free choice’ by firms and consumers unencumbered by state ‘interference’). In contrast to this, and to their credit, the strongly reformist parts of social democratic (and, it must be acknowledged, conservative) environmentalism ask big questions about how we in the West live, and whether our way of living should be a model for the likes of China, India and former Eastern Bloc. These big questions are asked even more insistently by social ecologists and deep greens.

2. The second problem is also related to message, and specifically its tone. Far too much environmentalist discourse within the non-liberal mainstream (and especially without) is perceived to be negative and hectoring. It is apparently preoccupied with environmental harm, damage and degradation. And its moral message is for people to be less selfish, less careless and more responsible. The preferable, and potentially vote winning, alternative to this has been proposed by American environmentalists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus. In their widely discussed 2004 essay ‘The death of environmentalism’, they chastised the main US environmental charities, foundations and NGOs for lacking an aspirational message. Citing Martin Luther King’s legendary ‘I have a dream speech’, they argued for a strategic switch by the likes of the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society towards a coherent and positive philosophy of life that can be sold to the American people. In their view, the ‘negative’ side of environmentalists’ arguments needs to be counter-balanced with ‘win-win’ proposals for societal change. To some extent this strategy is already in place and succeeding: Fair Trade campaigns (which

---

shade into the ‘soft’ end of social ecology) flatter consumers that they are caring and responsible people rather than sinners atoning inadequately for daily misdeeds.

3. The third problem is institutional. Throughout its history, the modern environmental movement has been dominated by non-governmental organisations, charities, foundations, think tanks and campaign bodies. By contrast, green political parties remain weak in terms of membership, resources and social visibility. If Western societies are to be greened in reformist, or in even more radical ways, then it will be essential to alter this state of affairs. The reason is that numerous pressure groups can undoubtedly exert an influence upon politics, economics and public behaviour. But the surest way to the hearts and minds of ministers, CEOs and people on the street is parliamentary politics. After all, the arena of government is where binding societal decisions are made. Green political parties are thus the best vehicles for articulating environmentalism as a worldview – are the best vehicles, in other words, for tackling problems one and two. The likes of Friends of the Earth or the International Federation for Animal Welfare certainly, matter, but are too often seen as ‘single issue’ or ‘special interest’ organisations rather than advocates of a complete philosophy of life. To reiterate, as long as environmentalism is seen to be about a thing called ‘nature’ it will not exert the wider influence many of its advocates wish for. This influence will work most effectively not through lobbying activities or ethical consumption campaigns (even though these sorts of activities are important), but by accessing the world of political power directly. To be sure, no one currently expects a green party in any Western state to become a ruling party. But if more greens can be elected as national representatives, there is an opportunity to radicalise the environmental policies of established political parties like the Republicans and Democrats. Part of this radicalisation would involve doing away with Departments of Environment and making environmental issues an organic part of all other government ministries. This would oblige more firms and citizens to act in eco-friendly ways via greater state regulation – including more non-market sticks and carrots.

The problem of institutional fragmentation is especially relevant to social democratic greens. The reason is obvious: social democratic greens dominate the institutional world of Western environmentalism, with the exception of the USA where green conservatives remain institutionally strong (think of the Sierra Club). Most Western green parties are social democratic ones; and most non-governmental green organisations of note (like
FoE) seek to combine social and ecological justice agendas in some way. There is thus great potential – currently unrealised – for social democratic greens within the mainstream to coordinate resources in order to maximise the impact of their message.

4. A fourth problem relates to the mass media. Media influence remains key to setting agendas for society at large. Yet environmental organisations on the left (and right) are remarkably peripheral to the tight world of national journalism and broadcasting in Western countries. Having the ear of editors, columnists and the like is essential to getting alternatives to liberal environmentalism more widely discussed. Left to its own devices, the Western media currently does a good job of reporting on environmental problems like over-fishing or deforestation. But it gives little or no emphasis to the alternative futures and policy ideas proposed by green political parties or campaigners like Jonathan Porritt, here in the UK. George Monbiot is rare among Western journalists today: an outspoken left wing radical (he’s a social ecologist) with a respectable platform (The Guardian newspaper). Likewise, the Canadian academic and green campaigner David Suzuki is unusual in having had a televisual platform to disseminate his outspoken criticisms of Western society. Their rarity is symptomatic of environmentalism’s general failure to penetrate the media world. The public face of environmental concern has for too long been dominated by putatively apolitical but well-meaning media figures like David Attenborough and David Bellamy.

5. A fifth problem is specific to social and deep ecology, especially their radical fringes. For devotees of both forms of environmentalism, the problem is their erstwhile cousin mainstream environmentalism – seen now less as a distant blood relative and more as an imposter in all of its permutations. For many social and deep ecologists, mainstream environmentalism deals merely with symptoms but not with causes. It envisages incremental change: refitting the ship at sea, so to speak, rather than jumping ship altogether (let alone sinking it). Accordingly, its very existence diverts attention away from the real issues – which for some are population numbers, for others are consumption levels, for still others are wealth maldistribution, and for many revolve around capitalism as an economic system. Eco-radicals in both camps, then, would regard an ‘insider’ like Porritt as a sell-out: for them, any truck with the current political-economic order necessitates abandoning one’s principles and true beliefs.
6. A final problem is again specific to social ecology (as well as its deep green
counterpart), and has been touched on above. Even if mainstream environmentalism did
not exist as a palliative, eco-radicals would still be left to confront the causes of the harm
that is daily visited on the non-human world and the least well-off in society. As noted,
these causes are seen variously as ‘over-population’, mass consumption, poverty, and the
capitalist commitment to endless economic growth. (To their credit, social ecologists
mostly abjure the ‘population problem’ discourse of many deep ecologists). Yet only a
change of tectonic proportions will address these causes effectively in the view of
‘fundamentalists’ within social and deep ecological ranks. In this light, the current
opportunity to green society which formed this essay’s opening contention is no
opportunity at all. In the end, many social and deep ecologists believe that a much more
dramatic push will be required to change the way we engage with nature in the West and
beyond.

Challenges and strategies
I have identified a set of problems that, while not exclusive to the green left, must be
confronted if it is to seize the moment. These various problems having been discussed,
what can the green left realistically do to answer affirmatively my epigrammatic question
– the one posed by Gregory Bateson? Let’s start with social democrats within the
environmental mainstream. As already noted, when compared to the social and deep
ecologists they (and their conservative counterparts) have the best chance to challenge a
currently dominant eco-liberalism here in the West. So what strategies should they adopt?

An important one relates to the issues of the tone and substance of their messages, and
the issue of access to the mass media – as discussed in the previous section. For too long,
the respectable face of the environmental movement in the West has lacked charismatic
figure-heads who can command wide public respect and gain the ear of politicians and
businesses. Mainstream greens wishing to challenge eco-liberalism desperately need an
equivalent of Blair or Clinton in their heydays. To be sure, such people only come along
once or twice in a generation – their availability cannot be engineered. (In Britain, Zac
Goldsmith could well prove to be an example of what I mean given time, but he is, alas,
a conservative in many respects). Once identified, social democratic greens would do well
to press their case by way of an effective stage-managing of their leaders. Yes it’s
important to spend time and energy making the arguments to the public, ministers and
shareholders. But it’s equally important to spend resources on cultivating a leader’s image. In Britain, the likes of Tony Juniper and Jonathan Porritt currently get less air time, and are less well known, than someone like BNP leader Nick Griffin. That’s a travesty.

Secondly, if charismatic leaders can be identified they need to use their influence to hammer home the message that environmentalism is not a single-issue cause. This message will not at be welcome in polite society – unless, as Shellenberger and Nordhaus suggest, it is phrased in positive, aspirational terms. Even then it will be a hard sell. Yet it is the only message that will deliver the preconditions for far-reaching reform to be made in the years ahead. Fortunately, ‘events’ might well make the message easier to digest for conventional political parties, the corporate world and the public. Unexpected incidents like another major oil spill, the final loss of an ‘indicator species’, or a sustained drought in a major Western state could ram home the necessity for major environmental reform. What the political philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre said 30 years ago still holds true. “A salient political fact of our time”, he observed in a critique of Herbert Marcuse’s idea of ‘repressive tolerance’, “is the limited extent to which [leading] politicians can control political issues”. Circumstances can oblige governments to undertake more radical actions than they had planned for, with wider societal impacts. If such actions are not forthcoming, these governments can pay a heavy price in terms of lost legitimacy – as Bush has learnt with Hurricane Katrina.

Thirdly, even with a fair political wind blowing, social democrats in the environmental mainstream must aim for greater unity. As already noted, on the left-wing of the mainstream – where most national green parties lie – there are a plethora of very well-known international campaign groups like Friends of the Earth. These campaign groups have some history of collaboration on specific issues, such as whaling. But they have rarely used their visibility, alone or in concert, to raise the profile of currently little-known green parties in Western states. If my earlier suggestion holds that democratic politics – rather than lobbying and media campaigns alone – is the surest route to long term societal influence, then more joined-up activities are now essential. Politicians, firms, the media and the public will be much more likely to take heed of left-wing environmentalists’ criticisms of eco-liberalism if they are consistent and emerge from a few high profile sources – rather than a panoply of separate organisations with their own

---

specific agendas. Ideally, some mergers should occur on the NGO, charity and think-
tank side of things. If this fails to occur, then some strategic alliances with green parties
are clearly key if they are to enjoy more success, and so be in a position to place direct
pressure on elected governments.

In sum, social democratic critics of eco-liberalism need charismatic leaders who are
effectively ‘imagineered’; they need to advocate environmentalism as a positive
worldview rather than play-safe by focusing on ‘green issues’; and they need to forge an
institutional environment that accents commonality-of-purpose rather than discrete
green agendas. If these things can be delivered then there is a real prospect that social
democratic greens can be a force for good in key Western states in a way not seen for 30
years. After all, a Democratic President is likely to be elected within 2 years; Brown has a
good chance of securing a 4th straight New Labour victory; and Germany remains the
largest Western state not to adopt eco-liberal policies en masse over the last three decades.
In these conditions, green social democrats might find a way to green their home
societies more thoroughly by way of conventional left-wing political parties. What,
though, of social ecologists (and their deep green counterparts)? It seems to me that they
have two well established options, but also a third one that is too often overlooked. This
third option involves the apparently paradoxical situation of social ecologists aiding social
democrat greens in the mainstream by criticism rather than cooperation.

The first established option is to continue a long history of militancy, civil dissent and
visible forms of protest. Many of the situations in which the grass-roots component of
social ecology arose involved what historical sociologist James Scott called ‘weapons of
the weak’.7 Anti-mining protests in Paul New Guinea or anti-dam rallies in rural India are
examples of poor people using the only oppositional tools available in the absence of
political and economic power. Likewise, on the deep ecological side, monkey-wrench
gangsters, hunt sabateurs, animal rights extremists, anti-road protesters and others are well
versed in the techniques of intimidation. Indeed, and hesitant to say it though I am, it
might be suggested that hardline greens take a leaf out of Al-Quaida’s book if they are to
force mainstream society to take greater notice of them. A staged, spectacular event – a
green equivalent to 9/11 as it were – could seem a sound strategic action for some
fundamentalists in both the social and deep ecological camps. However, it’s important to

7James Scott (19??) Weapons of the weak (}
note that not all militancy on the part of hardliners involves violence. The second established option is for social and deep greens to turn their back on the world and forge a new one in the few spaces for manoeuvre that remain. For decades, radical environmentalists have experimented with coops, non-monetary economies, self-help communities, small scale living and similar, quasi-anarchistic forms of existence. It is perfectly possible for more in this vein to be pursued, while mainstream society is left to its own devices including green reformers within it.

What these two options for green radicals have in common, of course, is a lack of constructive engagement with mainstream environmentalism in any of its three forms. Revolutionaries within the social ecological camp will have no truck with the ‘shallow greens’ in the environmental establishment – likewise with deep greens. This is a pity. There are two kinds of revolutions that are possible, one of them apparently oxymoronic. The first is the familiar revolution of sudden change emerging out of a societal crisis. The second is the ‘long revolution’ wherein a set of continuous quantitative changes over time produce a qualitative change in the long run. Social greens would do well to focus on both possibilities, not just the first, in order to realise their aspiration.

I say this because they have a role to play in radicalising mainstream environmentalism. This is the role of criticism: the role of attacking environmental ‘insiders’ like Portritt from the position of ‘outsiders’ dissatisfied with the eco-reforms on the table at any given moment in time. Such critical engagement involves moving beyond the options of protest and withdrawal to include dialogue with environmental reformers in the mainstream. This sort of dialogue can occur in a range of fora where spoken and written debate is permitted (e.g. the press, governmental expert committees, citizens’ juries etc.). In these fora social and deep greens can oblige environmental mainstreamers to demonstrate why more radical change is not yet possible, in the process getting their own favoured alternatives aired in public debate. Given the already mentioned potential that social democratic greens have to grow their influence, social ecologists would do well to engage them critically, as potential allies to be kept dancing on their toes. Remember too that unlike deep greens, social ecologists have a much wider audience that is potentially receptive to their message – for the simple reason that they care about the least well off, not just nature for its own sake.
Environmental realism

Let me conclude. At the start of this essay I asked whether environmentalism in the West was poised for renewal. Because it’s a heterogenous movement, the options for revival vary depending on which particular environmentalism we’re considering. Like the other contributors to this issue, my own hope is that the green left in both its reformist and radical forms can become a greater societal force than it currently is. What’s clear is that the strategic options for green leftists must be realistic ones. In the 1950s, the American sociologist C Wright Mills famously described the powers that be in Western societies as ‘crackpot realists’ because they believed in the indefinite continuation of their circumstances. Yet critics of the status quo – in Mills’ time, as in our own – are typically labelled idealists (i.e. ‘unrealistic’ fantasists). Clearly, social ecologists still have a formidable task on their hands if the world they wish to live in is to be created. But sadly, even social democratic reformers in the environmental mainstream have their work cut out, notwithstanding their considerable potential to make a wider difference. If the list of problems and challenges identified in this essay is valid, then it’s obvious just how much work still has to be done to seize the apparent moment of opportunity we live in. Let us hope that social democratic insiders like Porritt can grow their influence and so, over time, make social ecology the new common-sense in Britain and abroad. This could readily be linked to a wider renewal and reinvention of the ‘Left’ in the wake of that term’s hollowing-out by a decade of New Labour. Unrealistic thoughts perhaps, but without a bit of idealism today’s sorry socio-environmental realities cannot be remembered as tomorrow’s absurdities.

Noel Castree

---