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Ruralism or Environmentalism?

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ABSTRACT: Recent works on the historical sources of the environmental movement neglect environmental philosophy. They therefore fail to distinguish between two different currents of thought: ruralism – the romantic glorification of rural life; and environmentalism – a philosophy which is based on scientific information, anti-speciesism and respect for all organisms. These works, therefore, mistakenly identify ‘political ecology’ with right-wing ideologies.

KEYWORDS: Ruralism, environmentalism, biocentrism, greens

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Many people mistakenly believe the Green viewpoint to be related to nature only, or, more narrowly, to the glorification of rural life. Even advocates of the Green case themselves often stress the rural way of life, neglecting the urban aspects of environmentalism.¹ Although this error is most often committed by the general public, it is also made in historical studies of the development of ‘ecology’ as an ideological and political movement. Recently, several scholars have adopted this approach in order to examine the political and moral sources of environmental concern. The present article relates chiefly to Anna Bramwell’s *Ecology in the 20th Century*, which is a fascinating – although problematic – journey into the origins of environmental attitudes in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but more generally I refer to what I call the thesis of ‘ruralism’.²

These historians’ main argument about the history and development of the ecological movement is that the Green concept moved perceptibly from the political right at the beginning of this century to the centre, or more moderate right, today. But these studies, although they claim to be historical in character, have implications for an understanding of the Green case which go far beyond the purely historical sphere. Bramwell, for instance, ties the green outlook with right-wing ideologies. She argues that ecology derives from and is inspired by two main sources, namely biology and ‘energy economics’. Thus, her survey examines Haeckel’s holistic ecology and its ‘quasi-religious appeal’; fascist

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ecology; Darwinism; the ideas of its adversary, the anarchist Kropotkin; the romantic thinkers longing for rural life; and the relationship between ecology and nationalism – ‘Ecologists tend to be international, because of the global vision of their ideas; however, they also have a local sense of place, a feeling for the village or for the tribal patriotism’ (Bramwell 1989: 122). In addition, she explores the idea that ‘all is energy’, put forward by many, from utopian thinkers, such as Joseph Popper-Lynkeus in Germany, to post-World War II ‘planners’ such as George Stapledon. And although it is not entirely certain that all these scholars can be described as ‘ecologists’, Bramwell’s survey points to their main ideas (which often tend to be non-liberal and non-democratic) which, she claims, inspired later, i.e., modern ecology.

But the historians who advocate the thesis of ‘ruralism’ tend to have a biased view of the development of the ecology movements. This view is one that fits their theory about the political colour of the ecology movement, namely, that in a deep sense, these movements are rooted in the right. However, this theory is based on an analysis of the history of ecology which is incomplete. In the critique of the historical study of the sources of environmental attitudes which follows, I suggest a conceptual distinction between two forms of political ecology, namely ‘ruralism’ and ‘environmentalism’. I challenge the theory that all environmental attitudes derive from the traditions of the right and consequently are politically to the right of centre. I suggest that, on the contrary, there are two currents of environmental thought: one which is conservative, and another which is progressivist and modern. I claim that most contemporary environmentalists – among them environmental philosophers and activists in environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace – derive their inspiration from sources different from those indicated by Bramwell and other historians. Instead of drawing on these sources, which are mostly romantic and anti-scientific, most contemporary environmentalists base their theories on scientific information provided by the ecologists, meteorologists, environmental scientists etc., accompanied by a progressivist outlook.³ Notice, however, that my critique of the historians is not directed towards the history which they write, but rather towards their political theory. Thus I refer to conceptual and philosophical, rather than historical sources of contemporary environmental thought.

PHILOSOPHY: RURALISM VERSUS ENVIRONMENTALISM

The historians of the ‘ruralist’ school of thought are over-preoccupied by the single category of *ecology*. The reason for this is that these historians are familiar with most – if not all – of the historical, scientific and economic literature on ecology, as well as on mystical ruralism and romantic anti-urbanism. But the *philosophical* works on environmental matters are overlooked, particularly modern and contemporary works by prominent environmentalists or Green

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leaders. For instance, Bramwell mentions Porritt – an ex-director of Friends of the Earth in Britain and one of the leaders of the environmental movement in that country – only twice, very briefly, without any serious attempt to consider his books (1984, 1988), and there is not a word about Aldo Leopold.⁴ If there is an account of contemporary environmental philosophy, it tends to be superficial. Many historians, for instance, refer to ‘deep ecology’ as nothing but mystical philosophy, or as Bramwell calls it, ‘a non-party political search for Buddhist-type harmony’ (1989: 226). While this description may perhaps apply to certain specific works which tend to deep ecology, – e.g., those of Daniel Kealey (1990) – it overlooks the serious, if controversial, elements in the deep ecology argument (e.g. Naess 1989). At the same time, the historians ignore the other, non-‘deep ecology’ environmental philosophy. This is a surprising omission on the part of those whose ambition is to analyse the sources of environmental attitudes and Green ideas.

A much more serious treatment of environmental *philosophy* may be expected from any history of ecology. First, because the historical origins of most environmental philosophy differ from those of ruralism. But also because the basic premises and the whole approach of the prevailing environmental philosophy – i.e. biocentrism – is different from those of the environmental currents of thought which Bramwell refers to, and which can be described as ‘biology’ and ‘energy economics’. Consider, for example, the question of pollution. Garrett Hardin, a biologist who wrote one of the most quoted and influential papers on ecology, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (1968), assumed that the spread of pollution is an aspect of over-population. He wrote:

‘Flowing water purifies itself every 10 minutes’ my grandfather used to say, and the myth was near enough to the truth when he was a boy, for there were not too many people. But as population became denser, the natural chemical and biological recycling processes became overloaded. (Hardin 1968: 1245)

So, according to Hardin and the ‘biology’ school of thought, improving the state of the environment is a technological question, or one which could be solved by bureaucratic legislation in favour of birth control. The environmental philosophers, on the other hand, generally think in terms of ideologies or consciousness. They do not limit themselves to technological and *anthropocentric* points of view such as Hardin’s theory or any other ‘energy economics’ theory.⁵ Rather for them pollution is a question of human speciesism, or, in other words, moral attitudes. They say that if people changed their attitudes and became more sensitive to, say, ecosystems and their *intrinsic values*, or to the rights of non-human animals, they would also reduce pollution, the extinction of species, and so forth to a minimum (Rolston 1994). For example, in their attempt to ‘embrace a realist position’, these environmental philosophers, without wishing to abolish technology, question the precedence of the latter over the claims of the environment (Redclift 1993, Murphy 1992).

But the historians of ecology are preoccupied with the single category of 'ecology'. As a result there is an absence, in their writings, of any reference to philosophical works on environmentalism. They therefore draw over-hasty conclusions. Although the 'ruralist' thesis has the merit that it gives the reader an insight into potential or actual relationships which may have existed between certain environmental attitudes and right-wing ideologies,⁶ these relationships should not be over-exaggerated. Does the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian, for example, mean that all vegetarians are Nazis?⁷ Indeed, the main disadvantage of these historians' thesis is that since philosophy is not given proper treatment, there is no conceptual analysis, and therefore no distinction is drawn between what can be termed 'ruralism' on the one hand (which could conceivably sustain their thesis), and 'environmentalism' on the other. This could mislead students of the Green movement and its ideology, especially with regard to the relationships that environmental thought has with broader ideologies or schools of thought.

It should be noted that there are several other possible classifications of environmental thought: anthropocentric vs. ecocentric, relating to the philosophical premises of the theory; deep vs. shallow, relating to environmental philosophy and its political implications; and realists vs. fundamentalists, relating to the political strategy the Greens should adopt (cf. Dobson 1990; Horfrichter 1990; Young 1992). But it is not my aim here to discuss these taxonomies, and it is not quite clear where 'ruralism' should be placed (for instance, it is ecocentric, but definitely not in the same sense as Rolston's philosophy, for example). Moreover, these taxonomies usually relate to one main aspect of environmental concern: the political aspect, or the philosophical, etc., whereas my view is that philosophy and politics can be regarded as forming a single package, which could be described as an attitude of mind.

So let us examine these two concepts. By 'ruralism' I mean the glorification of country life, and a dissatisfaction with urbanism not only from the purely ecological point of view (e.g., as a source of pollution), but also because it is said to represent an inferior moral condition, or even a state of degeneration. For instance, Van de Weyer (1991), in his advocacy of a 'Christian' ruralism, stresses the fact that although he holds a job as a lecturer in Cambridge University – one of the centres of the modern, urban, scientific outlook – he is the vicar of four *rural* parishes. His romantic attitudes and the glorification of rural life are revealed in the way he relates the rebellion of the Earth to the rebellion of the soul, to moral harmony and religious, 'prophetic faith'. His environmental thought is a search for spiritual values which were common in the past. The 'rebellion' is therefore quite conservative, and the whole outlook of ruralism is nostalgic, based on a longing for the intimate relationship one had in 'older times' with 'mother nature', 'mother soil', etc. Ruralism is thus based on a peasantry-oriented value-system, and its attack on industry and modernisation represents a yearning for the *pre*-industrial period. It prefers symbols (mother nature),

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myths (e.g. Coyote Man, cf. Snyder 1990) to modern, conventional politics, which is seen as part of the 'system' responsible for the current environmental degradation. Ruralism is therefore likely to become affiliated with or be absorbed into radical right-wing ideologies, such as National-Socialism or Fascism, which also attacked modernism, rationality and politics between the two World Wars.

By environmentalism, on the other hand, I mean a philosophy based on anti-speciesism and respect for all organisms, for life, for ecosystems, and so forth. Paul Taylor (1986), for instance, bases his environmental theory on the idea that Kantian ethics may be extended to include the natural environment and all living things, while Tom Regan (1983) discusses the rights of non-human animals. Rather than being nostalgically inclined, environmentalism is future-oriented, aimed at preventing further environmental degradation and establishing a better moral relationship between human beings and other species. Rather than preaching the superiority of rural life, it is concerned with improving our urban life, without a rejection of industrialism. It can be said, on the contrary, that its attack on the harmful effects of industrialism is *post*-industrial, inasmuch as it does not deny that together with this damage, technology and industry have brought some social benefits.

To sum up the philosophical distinction, one current of political ecology is anti-rational, romantic, anti-bourgeois, and derives from a metaphysical conception of life which is anti-urban and anti-technological. The other current, popular chiefly in Britain, Scandinavia, Canada and the United States, but also held by the 'realists' among the German *Die Grunen*, is rational, deriving from an empirical and scientific examination of the state of the environment.⁸ And even if it does refer from time to time to Eastern philosophy in order to justify certain arguments (Goodman 1980; Rolston 1989), it still leans on scientific evidence and a rational discourse.

POLITICS: RIGHT OR LEFT?

Following the philosophical distinction which these historians should have recognised, there are also political differences they should have noticed. Bramwell's own work is influenced by her own previous research (1985) into the 'existence of ecological arguments so similar to today's in the Third Reich'. She is consequently inclined towards an over-emphasis on the *German* version of ecology, so that she describes contemporary *German* Green ideas as 'an ambition of today's Greens' (Bramwell 1989: 11), without taking into account the variety of different political attitudes existing among the Greens.⁹

However, this tendency to ignore the spectrum of political attitudes within ecology is related to the neglect of the different varieties of environmental thought. One illustration is Bramwell's claim that ecologists would like to keep

the small farmer on his land (Bramwell: 11, 67, 200-209, 215-219). But most *British Greens*, at least, do not always share this aim and do not wish to return to a pre-urban society.¹⁰ For instance, Jonathon Porritt writes:

[T]he age of Industrialism has indeed brought enormous benefits to millions of people, in terms of both material improvements and democratic rights. It serves little purpose to deny that enormous progress has been made over the last two hundred years, and there is certainly no question of the politics of ecology harking back to some pre-industrial Golden Age. It wasn't golden; it was often mean, miserable and moronic. (Porritt 1984: 19)

Another example is the 'rural' historians' claim that ecologists themselves argue that 'rationality has always battled with intuition'.¹¹ Indeed, many environmentalists claim that rationalistic, economic calculations are not a suitable response to the theoretical and practical challenges presented by the state of the environment, or, as Schumacher said, these calculations are not necessarily rationalistic in this context. Nevertheless, they do not use intuitive arguments (which would connect them to the tradition of romanticism and the political right, especially in Germany), in support of their ideas. Rather they put forward analytical arguments about the market mechanism and the environment, or about the irrelevance of models of consumers' behaviour in a context (the environment) where people should and do behave as citizens (Sagoff 1988: 24-50).

Moreover, it seems that these historians' image of the contemporary ecological movement is somewhat distorted; considering only ideas which favour rural life, they disregard many modern *urban* and *international* problems which preoccupy environmental groups and parties all over the world, from sewage to animals' rights and nuclear testing (Caldwell 1984; Porter and Brown 1992). And in their concentration on rural ideology, they overlook major environmental theories on the left: theories which represent capitalism and the idea that the market should 'rule' as the causes of over-production; theories which regard the greenhouse effect and massive pollution as social problems (e.g., Bookchin 1982, 1991, Clark 1990), and theories that consider third world poverty to be one of the causes of resource depletion (Seabrook 1990).

ENVIRONMENTALISM AS A 'THIRD WAY'

In short, historians of the environmental movement must not neglect the fact that most contemporary Green thought and politics extend far beyond a concern for the environment, let alone a concern for the natural environment. It is a total outlook, and unlike ruralism, which tends to recommend a retreat to oneself, environmentalism often includes a call for a highly participatory democracy, and a defence of individuals' rights. Bramwell notes that what she calls 'left-Greens' call for more participation and egalitarianism, but she mistakenly interprets this

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as proof that they 'do not seem very green at all compared to single issue ecological groups'. But it seems that, on the contrary, single-issue and local ecological groups are not necessarily 'green'. People join those groups for a variety of reasons, including meeting new people and making new friends, and these groups become 'collections of individuals, from different backgrounds, with different interests in the environment' (Weston 1989: 146).

Which is exactly the point: the contemporary Green outlook is different from ruralism. It challenges both socialism and capitalism, declaring itself to be a 'third way'. As such it constitutes a comprehensive outlook which champions the cause of individuals and their welfare, and involves women's rights, minorities, unemployment, the third world, and other social issues. The Green ideology is widely regarded as part of the 'new politics', which is characterised by a concern for individual self-determination, a maximum of tolerance towards 'alternative' life-styles, together with an advocacy of participatory democracy (Pogunkte 1989:175-193; Ingelhart 1977; 1981). Accordingly, Paehlke ascribes to environmental politics the aim of supporting and sustaining democratic values (1988), and Jonathon Porritt, when elucidating his Green philosophy, utilises the liberal terminology of rights:

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 crisis of inaction. (Porritt 1984: 115).

Is it possible for such arguments to tie in with the tradition of the radical right? Of course not. It seems that a genuine and very serious consideration of the possibility that ecological attitudes can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages,¹² blinds some historians to the important distinction that they should have made between the two currents of thought.

Even when Bramwell does admit that 'the most successful green movements today are of the radical left' (1989: 7), she seems reluctant to be decisive about it, arguing that the development of ecological concern in fact starts on the right. To students of the history of ideas who are familiar with the works of Jacob Talmon (1955; 1980), Bramwell's work rings a bell: the common roots of the radical left and the radical right – mainly a rejection of individualism – are proved once again, this time in the ecological sphere. Ecology, claims Bramwell, moved to the left, but it remained anti-individualistic, romantic and utopian, and in that respect did not depart from its rightist origins. And thus, 'rural' historians stress organic and romantic farming (Van de Weyer), an ambivalence towards or a rejection of 'progress' (Wallach 1991) and anti-individualistic trends in the ecological movements of the nineteen-sixties (Bramwell 1989: 214-15). They also claim that German protest movements in the nineteen-seventies – feminists, anti-nuclear and anti-American groups – 'came to the same concern for environmental values as their grandparents' (Bramwell 1989: 219), and assert that the

'Greens' in Britain attracted people partly because 'green in English carries a connotation of old rural myth'. They even go as far as to describe the Green groups in Europe as pagans, at once part of the Nouvelle Droite and of socialist anarchism (Bramwell 1989: 227-230).

But is this description accurate and does it do justice to green thought? The answer, of course, is negative. To see this, let us carry the distinction between ruralism and environmentalism a bit further. First, ruralism and radical right-wing ideology do share certain ideas: referring to the land as a 'mother', a desire for a psychological change,¹³ and, generally speaking, an attempt to replace the Western 'system' with a more spiritual one. Being 'green', in this case, applies to personal life, spiritual activities, nutrition, and a 'transformation of the human self' (Bahro 1994: 156), as well as to communal life and 'non-political' politics. Being green is therefore only one of the means of achieving the aim of abolishing the bourgeois political system. But environmentalism, on the other hand, struggles to create a society which is more environment-friendly. Participatory democracy and working within the existing political systems is one of the means of achieving this, because only through participation can the citizen defend his or her rights, from freedom of speech to a less polluted environment. This can be illustrated by the following table.

	Ruralism	Environmentalism
Aim	The abolition of the rationalistic, bourgeois system in politics, and the creation of a new mentality.	A more environment-friendly society
Means	Being 'green'.	Grassroots democracy and working within the existing political system.

So, although environmentalism is not and cannot be purely individualistic,¹⁴ it is nevertheless an advocate of the individual, defending his or her rights against companies, industries and sometimes the state itself, which pollute rivers, water resources, the atmosphere, etc., or irresponsibly deplete natural resources.

Finally, this distinction between ruralism and modern environmentalism as two currents of thought and two distinctive outlooks, is backed by ample support in the analysis of the sociological and political background of the Green members and supporters. This research indicates that there is a strong correlation between being Green in the modern sense and pro-peace and pro-welfare attitudes, or between liberal-mindedness and support for environmental policies (Rudig 1988; Van Liere and Dunlop 1980; Vig 1990). This contradicts, again, the 'ruralist' thesis.

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CONCLUSION

One must not fail to appreciate the scientific and philosophical value of the arguments put forward by ecologists, environmentalists and environmental philosophers in particular. It is therefore wrong to describe the logic of ecology as if it is romantic, hasty, and in particular irrational.

All reason is abandoned at the sight of an apparently scientific legitimisation of the modern ecologists' dream that the hunter-gatherer life is viable, that agriculture, with its property rights, its discontents, its brutalities, was never necessary (Bramwell 1989: 246).

No wonder, then, Bramwell concludes that political ecology is 'fascism without the national dimension'. Many other people, most of whom are growth enthusiasts, join Bramwell and accuse the Green movement of being reactionary and of opposing modern civilisation, or else of being selfish (Belsey 1989).¹⁵ But such a description of ecology is far too simplistic and neglects the variety of streams in environmental thought, as I hope I have demonstrated. This should be stressed in order to avoid the de-legitimisation of Green thinking on the grounds that political ecology and right-wing ideologies are, so to speak, bedfellows.

NOTES

¹ An example of the opposite approach is Goodin's book (1992). For an excellent discussion of the cultural and political reasons why certain issues have emerged as *the* constituents of ecology, see Grove-White and Szerszynski 1992.

² Bramwell 1989. See also Van de Weyer 1991, and Nash (1989, 'Ideological Origins of American Environmentalism'), which relate mostly to romantic attitudes to nature. It should be noted, however, that Nash would not agree with Bramwell's thesis, and that his book gives a different history of environmentalism. For a ruralist outlook see Edward Goldsmith (1988: chap. 7). For other attitudes, see Young 1990, and Allaby and Bunyard 1980.

³ At this point it is worth commenting on two concepts and the way I use them here. The terms 'environmental attitudes' and 'environmental thought' refer to the entire ideological, philosophical, and political literature on the environment and on human beings' relationships with it. By 'environmentalism', on the other hand, I mean a specific mode of thinking about the environment, which, I believe, is mainstream environmental thought at the present time. I shall elaborate on this below.

⁴ For an account of the 'greening of philosophy' see Nash (1989: 121-161).

⁵ It should be noted that a few non-biocentric works *can* be categorised as 'environmental' philosophy, but they are based on 'sustainable development' modes of thought rather than on 'technology', 'biology' or 'energy economics'.

⁶ For an illuminating study of this kind, see Coates (1993a; 1993b).

⁷ I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

⁸ Although some may argue that the relationships between science and environmental

philosophy are not necessarily in this direction. See Shrader-Frechette 1994 and Grove-White et al. 1992.

⁹ The German Greens are unquestionably the most dominant and visible Green party in Europe. Still, there are other parties, of varied characters in a number of countries, e.g. Britain, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, and so forth. For a comprehensive survey see Parkin 1989.

¹⁰ This is true of the general public in Britain as well. See, for instance, Young (1990: 80-1), who demonstrates that the general concern for the countryside is for the sake of the countryside itself rather than in order to protect the farmers' jobs.

¹¹ See John Young's discussion of Schumacher's work (1990, chap. 5, "Small is beautiful, but can we afford it?").

¹² Compare Bramwell. (1989: chap. 2) and Allaby and Bunyard, (1980: especially chaps 1, 2).

¹³ See for example the works of Rudolf Bahro (1986: 94; 1994: 196f.), and the priority which he gives to the spirit over politics. See also Bookchin's critique (1991) of Dave Foreman from *Earth First!*

¹⁴ See my 'Europe, Liberalism and the Environment', in Brecher B. (ed.) *Liberalism and the New Europe*, Avebury Press, 1993.

¹⁵ For an interesting discussion about this reaction, see Morrison and Dunlop 1986, and Eckersley 1989.

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