

## ECOLOGISM

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### Summary

Although attention for and appreciation of nature are timeless phenomena, their translation into political terms is of a very recent date (*Section 2*). In the last decades of the twentieth century, three closely related schools of political thought emerged, collectively referred to as ecologism: environmentalism, ecological pragmatism, and (the most radical of the three) ecologism in a strict sense (*see Section 3*). Their differences in perspective originate first of all in a long series of ethical and metaphysical questions relating to their object of concern: the exact status of the ecological system and the role of humans in it (*see Section 4*). In addition, they disagree on whose interests are to be taken into account: those of humans and future generations of humans only, or those of animals, life in general or the ecosystem itself (*see Section 5*). As a consequence, ideas about the ecologically ideal world range from life in simple Arcadian communities to a modestly reformed liberal democratic world society (*see Section 6*). In moving towards their respective ideals, the three schools all at least amend and sometimes reject the classic view of sustainable development as meeting the needs of present generations of humans without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (*see Section 7*). Apart from this, the influence of "green political thought" on government policy (*see Section 8*) and political action outside

parliament (*see Section 9*) has been extensive. Whether this influence is lasting (*see Section 10*) depends on the moral appeal it can exert as much as on the degree to which environmental problems can actually be solved within existing political structures. If not, both the ecological crisis and radical ecologism are looking forward to a bright future.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1970s, a political theory was developed that explained environmental and social problems as results of mismanagement of the ecological system: ecologism. Ecologism is not a monolithic doctrine: its advocates often disagree on e.g. the (relative) moral value of nature, animals, and humans, the cause of environmental problems, and on goals and means. These differences explain the existence of three schools within ecologism: ecologism in the strict sense, environmentalism, and ecological pragmatism.

The three are united in stressing the interconnected character of environmental problems, the danger they pose to the survival of humankind and the need for political reform rather than purely technical solutions. Furthermore, all three have their reasons for amending or even rejecting the famous Brundtland definition of sustainability, which stresses only the needs of humans, not those of animals or nature itself.

Ecologism defends a radical reform of society, zero economic growth and a reduction of the population, an adaptation of cultures and consumption patterns to regional ecological circumstances, and the protection of nature against every form of irreversible destruction. Environmentalism is less radical in supporting reforms leading to sustainability, provided nature's ability to sustain and renew itself is not compromised. Ecological pragmatists take an intermediary position, arguing that environmentalist policies do not contradict but can help realize ecological aims.

Ecologism has exerted a deep influence on modern politics and political theory; ecological movements have become part of mainstream political life. Whether their influence will be lasting depends partly on the degree to which environmental problems can actually be solved within existing political structures.

## 2. The Roots of Ecologism

Like many other political theories, ecologism evolved in response to an encounter between existing theories and unforeseen, theoretically inexplicable or unfeasible problems. In the case of ecologism, the deciding factor was the emergence of a long series of natural, social and political problems that were apparently only accidentally related to one another: food scarcity and underdevelopment, the extinction of species, eutropification and pollution, resource scarcity crises and so on. Ecologism introduced a framework in which these problems could be understood as explicable and interconnected: they were all supposedly related to mismanagement of the ecology, the ecological system (*see Ecology*).

By ecological system or ecology we denote the (web of) relations between nature and the artificial human world, including all the individual entities that make up nature and

the human world: animals, plants, humans, factories, mountains, etc. Note an important difference between ecology and environment: an environment has a center to which it relates. In everyday life, environment is synonymous with human environment. Ecologism in a strict sense (*see Section 3*) is cautious not to use the term environment too often, since that would indicate a human-centered approach to nature, which ecologists see as both ethically wrong and empirically mistaken. Ecologism is, at basis, a critique of the Enlightenment notion that nature is nothing but an inexhaustible resource to be used for human ends only.

Early Enlightenment theorists, when discussing nature, paid little attention to environment or ecology. For John Locke, for instance, the environment presented neither moral nor factual problems; the whole idea of an environment did not exist. Humankind did not live "in" an environment but on the verge of nature. Nature had two roles to play in Enlightenment thought: physically, it was an inexhaustible source of resources; metaphysically, it was the incarnation of the laws of nature, which humans had transcended. Similar ideas are expressed by contemporaries like Spinoza and Pufendorf: for them, humans differed enough from the rest of physical nature to rise above it and create an independent realm of their own, society. Yet in doing so, humanity still followed the laws of metaphysical nature, the first law of which is the urge to survive, to persist in existence (*conatus perseverandi*; Spinoza). It is therefore not as if humankind had fully thrown off the bonds of nature; there are no such bonds. Rather, it was endowed with a special gift, reason, which allowed it to discover and all in accordance with natural law use the leeway that nature's leashes gave it. Like medieval philosophers, Enlightenment thinkers saw a hierarchical difference between reasonable and unreasonable beings, between humans, animals and plants, an hierarchy often still crowned with angels and, the non plus ultra of Reason, God. Being unfree and therefore beyond ethics, the "lower" forms of existence were seen as part of nature-as-resource.

In every Enlightenment description of the "state of nature," two aspects were balanced against one another: physical nature as nasty and brutish, and as useful and benevolent. In its friendly aspect, nature provides for all human wants, and it provides for them incessantly; it is an ever-flowing Horn of Plenty. From the other point of view, it is wild, raw, unconquered, untamed. We have to cultivate it, tame it and transform it into something edible, drinkable, wearable, readable, in general: useful. From both perspectives, natural law in the form of the justified quest for survival gives humanity the fullest right to take possession of nature, turn it into private property and use it to its own purposes. Both perspectives can therefore serve to help explain the genesis of society. If humans in a fictitious state of nature would live alone, fighting a war of all against all (Thomas Hobbes), reason plus the urge to survive will point the way towards cooperation and away from want. If humans would live communally in more neighborly circumstances (John Locke), that same urge will incite reform and show humans how to better their positions.

Next to the Enlightenment's way of conceiving of physical nature, ecologists have criticized the way it conceived of the relation between humans and the world as such. Ecologists see the distinction René Descartes and Enlightenment philosophers in later times made between mind and body, self and outside world, as responsible for the

instrumental, technocratic and disrespectful attitude towards nature that would characterize modern times.

The period and thought of the French revolution saw the birth of new philosophies that would in time lead to a revised attitude towards nature. One of these incorporated the liberal scepticism towards religious and in general "higher" truths: utilitarianism. Utilitarianism rejected all notions of such moral criteria and instead (super-) imposed the positivistic idea of the purely human good: the subjective experience of pleasure and pain. Even those who did not accept the conclusions of utilitarianism now sometimes accepted as a premise that humans and animals did have something in common, something that was morally relevant sensual experiences. A second influential theory was a typical reaction to, but in a sense compatible with, positivism and utilitarianism: romanticism, with its love for the aesthetic and emotional in general and in nature in particular. In later years, romanticism won a bad name as a source of inspiration for fascists and Nazis; their appreciation of and for nature in turn later caused (sometimes) justified suspicions to rise as to the democratic dispositions of ecologists.

Romanticism and utilitarianism allowed the first defenders of nature to argue for the recognition of the uniqueness of a landscape and its elements, and so on to the idea that some forms of natural capital are simply non-substitutable, as well as to argue against cruelty to animals. From the 1850s on, when the environment started to appear on political agendas as a public good and public interest, the state became involved. It is not coincidental that this period saw the founding of the first nature reserves (e.g. Yellowstone Park in the USA) and the emergence of organizations like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. However, the latent tension between nature the beautiful and nature as an inexhaustible collection of resources remained precisely that: latent. The idea of physical scarcity, other than purely local or temporary, still had to be born.

The two main strands of nature-oriented political thought in these times were conservationism and preservationism. Both were interested in protecting nature only insofar as it was seen as valuable enough to maintain: for preservationists e.g. the buffalo, for conservationists the city park around the corner. The difference between the two, in so far as a difference was discernible, lies in their denying respectively accepting a kind of holism, that is, the dependence of and interconnectedness between the elements of an ecosystem. As a consequence, preservationists insisted on more stringent measures for the protection of sanctuaries for nature, while conservationists to this day accept "wise use" of natural resources.

A new phase was entered in the 1960s, among others due to the Club of Rome's report on the Limits to Growth and the DDT scandal described in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Three ideas began to dominate the public debate on nature: the idea that environmental problems are interconnected and border crossing (holism), that nature as a whole is in crisis, and that this crisis forms a threat to the survival of humankind and the planet. Holism also found a place in science with the introduction of now familiar concepts like ecosystem, ecosphere and biosphere and the introduction of a new scientific discipline, ecology, studying nature on the basis of the assumption of

interdependence of the elements of an ecosystem. In politics, political theory and political ideology, new parties and initiatives appeared under names like "green," "environmentalism," and "ecologism".

It is important to note that for a long time the environmental concerns of mainstream political theories were limited (when present at all) to pollution, animal rights, the global distribution of resources, and obligations to future generations. None of these four was seen as a typically environmental problem or even as having an environmental dimension. Mainstream theorists distinguished themselves even further from green thinkers by not mentioning the issue of the intrinsic value of nature, not considering the possibility that economic growth might end one day, by the absence of ideas like depletion of resources, physical limits to growth, sustainability or the carrying capacity of ecosystems; even references to the protection of nature reserves were absent. It is only in recent years that the borderline between ecologism and mainstream political theories has begun to blur.

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