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Barry, J. (2014). Green Political Theory. In V. Geoghegan, & R. Wilford (Eds.), *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (4 ed., pp. 153-178). Routledge.

**Published in:**

Political Ideologies: An Introduction

**Document Version:**

Early version, also known as pre-print

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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# Green Political Theory

Forthcoming in Geoghegan, V. and Wilford, R. (eds), (2014), *Political Ideologies*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Routledge).

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## Introduction

Ecologism or green political theory is the most recent of schools of political thinking. On the one hand, it focuses on issues that are extremely old in politics and philosophical inquiry – such as the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds, the moral status of animals, what is the ‘good life’, and the ethical and political regulation of technological innovation. Yet on the other, it is also characterised as dealing with some specifically contemporary issues such as the economic and political implications of climate change, peak oil, overconsumption, resource competition and conflicts, and rising levels of global and national inequalities. It is also an extremely broad school of political thought covering a wide variety of concerns, contains a number of distinct sub-schools of green thought (here sharing a similarity with other political ideologies) and combines normative and empirical scientific elements in a unique manner making it distinctive from other political ideologies.

First a word about definitions. There are a number of terms used to describe green political theory ranging from ‘ecologism’, to ‘environmentalism’ or ecological political theory or environmental political theory (Barry and Dobson, 2003). This chapter uses the term ‘green political theory’ on the grounds that both ecological and environmental labels, while certainly conveying one of the key distinguishing features of green political theorising – namely its focus on both the material/metabolic dimensions of human-nonhuman relations as well as the ethical and political status of the nonhuman world – can offer a rather narrow understanding of green politics. What I mean by this is that ecologism, or environmental political theory, as a way of categorising green politics is too focused on these issues of nature and human-nature relations and does not, at least in my view, allow sufficient scope for the ‘non-ecological’ and ‘non-nature related’ principles of green politics. This is particularly the case in respect of understanding and appreciating the specifically intra-human dimensions of green political theory.

There is a common distinction often made in the literature between ‘environmentalism’ and ‘ecologism’ (Dobson, 2007), with environmentalism denoting a form of ‘single issue’ green politics solely concerned with, for instance, pollution and resource management, and ecologism denoting a fully fledged political ideology with views on non-resource and non-environmental concerns. In this respect what is offered here is closer to ecologism than environmentalism, but nevertheless uses green political theory as the appropriate term since even ecologism conveys a definite sense (at least on first sight) that green politics is largely or exclusively concerned with the non-human world and human-nonhuman relations. Thus while it

may seem to be simply a pedantic issue, this chapter uses ‘green political theory’ instead of ‘ecologism’ as a more appropriate, inclusive categorisation of green politics, which fully acknowledges the uniqueness of its focus on nature while also stressing its radical approach to the organisation of human social, economic and political relations, consistent, but not exclusively tied to or derived from its focus on the metabolism between humans and nature.

## Some Origins of Green Political Thinking

Some origins of green theory can be identified and summarised:

- the ‘romantic’ and negative reactions to the Industrial Revolution, from working class and peasant resistance to capitalism, mechanisation and the factory production system, the enclosure of the commons, and the despoliation of the countryside;
- the positive reaction to the unfinished project of the French (democratic) Revolution;
- a negative reaction to ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a related concern with global ecological injustice, the ‘ecological debt’ owed by the minority/‘developed’ world to the majority/‘underdeveloped’ world and minority/majority world relations of inequality and power;
- the emergence of the science of ecology and Darwin’s evolutionary theory, and later the integration of science, ethics and politics in diagnosing and providing answers to socio-ecological and related problems;
- issues around the resource, pollution and especially energy foundations for human social, economic and political organisation, lifestyles and realisable conceptualisations of the ‘good society’ and ‘good life’;
- growing public perception of an ‘ecological crisis’ in the 1960s, claims of ‘Limits to Growth’ from the 1970s onwards, and the emergence of ‘global environmental problems’ in the 1980s and 1990s, and peak oil and climate change in the early part of this century;
- transcending the politics of ‘industrialism’ (organised on a left–right continuum) by a politics of ‘post-industrialism’ (beyond left and right);
- increasing awareness of and moral sensitivity to our relations with the nonhuman world (from the promotion of ‘animal rights’ and animal welfare to ideas that the Earth is ‘sacred’ and/or has intrinsic value);
- the integration of progressive social, political and economic policies with the politics of transition to a sustainable society, principally the universal promotion of human rights, socio-economic equality, democratisation of the state and the economy. (Barry, 2007)

Of particular importance is the central concern of green theory and practice to overcome both the separation of ‘human’ from ‘nature’ and also the misperception of humans as above or ‘superior’ to nature. Green political theory can be seen as an attempt to bring humanity and the study of human society ‘down to earth’. The science of ecology played an important part in arguing that humans as a species of animal (that is, we are not just *like* animals, we *are* an animal species) are ecologically embedded in nature, and exist in a web-like relation to other species,

rather than being at the top of some 'great chain of being'. It is crucial to note the significance of green political and social theory having a strong basis in the natural sciences (mainly ecology, evolutionary and environmental psychology, the biological life sciences and thermodynamics), because, as will be suggested below, this gives us a strong indication of what the 'greening' of social theory may involve.

A second and related point, is that green social theory, in transcending the culture/nature split, begins its analysis based on a view of humans as a species of natural being, which like other species has its particular species-specific characteristics, needs and modes of flourishing (and non-flourishing). Central to green theory, unlike other forms of political theory, with the exception of feminism, is a stress on the 'embodiedness' of humans as ethically and politically significant.

A third issue which green political theory raises is the way in which social-environmental relations are not only important in human society, but also *constitutive* of human society. That is, one cannot offer a theory of society without making social-environmental interaction, and the natural contexts and dimensions of human society, a central aspect of one's theory. In its attention to the naturalistic bases of human society, the green perspective is 'materialistic' in a different and arguably much more fundamental way than within Marxist theory for example. Unlike the latter, green political theory concerns itself with the external and internal natural conditions of human individual and social life, whereas the 'material base' for Marx is primarily economic not natural. Hence, a green understanding of the metabolism (a particularly evocative and appropriate term used by both greens and Marxists) includes the economic transformative process, but also more importantly the ecological, natural biodiversity, resource and energy flows and stocks that underpin all human economic activity. The economy is thus of particular interest from a green perspective since it is at the centre of the material metabolism between the human and non-human. And as will be seen, a key feature of green political theory in this respect is the re-casting of how we understand the 'economy' and the 'economic'.

At the same time, this materialist reading of green social theory questions the 'post-materialist' character often ascribed to green politics and issues, as given by Inglehart's popular explanation for green politics as 'post-materialist' (Inglehart, 1977) and, thereby, a mainly middle-class, European/Western phenomenon. This characterisation of green politics is one that Marxists have drawn attention to and used to demonstrate the 'anti-working class' interests of green politics. However, both this Marxist critique and Inglehart's thesis fail to explain the 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier, 2001), the class, ethnic and race dynamics of the environmental justice movement (Schlosberg, 2009), or 'resistance ecofeminism' (Shiva, 1988). The Eurocentric perspective of Inglehart's analysis is of course limiting as is the empirically weak connection he makes between wealth/income levels and post-materialist values (Cudworth, 2003: 71) and his limiting of 'environmental concern' to aesthetic/amenity rather than material or productive interests people have with their environments, both as resources (such as land) and a sink for pollutants/waste.

A fourth issue to note about green theory is its moral claim about our relationship to the natural environment. What makes green moral theory distinctive is that it wishes to extend the 'moral community' beyond the species barrier to include our interaction

with the nonhuman world as morally significant, as well as extending the moral community temporally into the future in its focus on the rights of generations yet to be born and concerns, notably expressed in the idea of ‘sustainability’, of intergenerational justice.

## **Waves of Green Political Theorising**

One way of understanding the development of green political theory is in terms of waves, much as feminism (see Chapter XXX) is often categorised in terms of its evolution. ‘First wave’ green political theory was primarily concerned with articulating the distinctiveness of ‘ecologism’ as an ideology and green political theory as a distinctive approach to politics (Porritt, 1984; Pepper, 1984; Spretnak and Capra, 1985; Dryzek, 1987; Dobson, 1990; Eckersley, 1992; Paehlke, 1989; Hayward, 1995). ‘Second wave’ ecological thought was characterised by a concern with debates between green political theory and other schools of thought such as liberalism, feminism, critical theory and socialism, as well as focusing on some key concepts within political thought such as democracy, justice, the state and citizenship (Barry, 1999; Mellor, 1997; Salleh, 1999; Wissenburg, 1998; de-Shalit, 1996; Doherty and de Geus, 1996; Sakar, 1999; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996).

Recent developments in what can be termed ‘third generation’ green political thought are noticeable for its explicitly interdisciplinary and applied focus. Indeed, on one level it is intellectually difficult to reflect on the many issues of concern to green political theory without venturing into and combining disciplines and bodies of knowledge outside politics, political science and political theory. Related to this interdisciplinary focus, third generation scholarship on green politics and sustainability tends to be informed by a much wider range of disciplines integrated with practical, empirical research. Examples of third way green political theory include my own work, *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability* (Barry, 2012), Molly Scott-Cato’s *Green Economics* (Scott-Cato, 2008), Andy Dobson’s *Environmental Citizenship* (Dobson, 2003); Mathew Humphrey’s *Ecological Politics and Democratic Theory* (Humphrey, 2008); Graham Smith’s *Deliberative Democracy and the Environment* (Smith, 2003), Simon Hailwood’s *How to be Green Liberal* (Hailwood, 2004), or Tim Hayward’s *Constitutional Environmental Rights* (Hayward, 2005). Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without Growth* (Jackson, 2009), has done much to publicise long articulated green economic ideas (especially in relation to questioning conventional ‘economic growth’), at a time when such ideas are needed more than ever in our public debate about and responses to the current global economic recession. Or the research, publications and policy briefs from think tanks such as the new economic foundation - the incubator of many green political and economic ideas, ranging from its prescient and path breaking *Green New Deal* report in 2008 (Green New Deal Group, 2008), to the more recent publication of Boyle and Simms on *The New Economics* (Boyle and Simms, 2009).

## **Green Politics, Applied Theory and State, Market and Community**

Green political theory can be understood as a form of applied political theory, and here it shares this feature with other ideologies all of which seek to make a difference and change the world or society according to their particular political principles. The

task of an applied approach to political theory is to analyse some basic political or ethical principles – democracy, justice, and citizenship for example – and see what follows from them given the empirical ‘reality of the situation’ that faces humanity today, or a particular human society. That is, to explore how public policy can best be implemented - consistent with principles and empirical facts - as well as figuring out how best to institutionalise the achievement of those principles. In particular, the institutional focus of applied political theory approach centers on the appropriate ordering and respective roles and relationships between what can be considered to be the three basic governance/political or order-producing institutions of human societies. These are the state, the market and the community.

The identification of these three institutions is important in that by employing them one can get a good, if basic and rough, idea of different political ideologies in terms of the relative weight and role accorded to state, market and community in both the ideology’s analysis of the current political situation and their suggestion for how it should be improved and what their ideal society would look like. For example, most ‘right-wing’ political ideologies, such as conservatism or liberalism, tend to favour the free and self-regulating market i.e. capitalism, as the best institutional form for governing the human economy. What this means is that they favour the free market for ordering and governing the human metabolism with the non-human world, including resources, energy sources, waste sinks. On the other hand, some ‘left-wing’ political ideologies, such as Marxist forms of socialism, would tend to favour state-based forms of economic organisation and regulation. Here greens, in keeping with dominant strains of anarchism, differ in favouring the community as a preferred locus of economic (and political) organisation.

Green political theory favours, and prioritises, the community and communal forms of economic, cultural and political organisation and regulation. This can be seen in the long-standing green interest and support for initiatives based on the principle of ‘small is beautiful’ (Schumacher, 1973) where appropriate; ‘human scale’ technology and less centralised forms of political democratic institutions (Sale, 1980); a suspicion of bureaucratised and professionalised/elite modes of meeting human needs (Illich, 1971); more local, grassroots forms of economic and political initiatives such as Transition Towns (Hopkins, 2008); and support for more localised and cooperative forms of economic activity (Cato, 2008). Perhaps the clearest instance of this privileging of the community is the strong preference for the ‘social economy’ over and above either market/private or state/public forms of economic life and associated notions of the economy being embedded in, rather than completely divorced from, human social life and social norms (Barry, 2012).

From the perspective of green political theory, the state and market are therefore best regarded as instrumental to supporting community-based forms of political and economic organisation and ways of life. That is, from a green political point of view we should judge, assess and think about the state and the market (and associated principles and ideas such as private property, modes of economic organisation and the democratic regulation of the state, and state-citizen relations) in relation to their contribution in ensuring that political, economic and cultural life is organised by, and at, the community level. Thus, while most greens (with the exception of eco-anarchists) do not reject the state, and while they are profoundly suspicious of the concentration and centralisation of power within and by the state, they do see a role

for a more democratised and decentralised state in regulating the market to prevent the latter from undermining key green values such as social solidarity, high levels of well-being, human scale connectedness and the intrinsic values of work (and here greens do not conflate work with formally paid employment). Above all, there is a role for the state in regulating any market-based organisation of human economic relations to prevent the emergence and maintenance of high levels of socio-economic inequality, since the latter is not only corrosive of key green values - which are constitutive of community itself - but which, as Wilkinson and Pickett demonstrate (2008), inequalities undermine key aspects of the transition from unsustainability (see also Barry, 2012).

### **Green Politics and *Actually Existing Unsustainability***

While completely accepting the need for and importance of more abstract, conceptually based theorising, there is a major difference between debates about a *theory or theories of justice* (which dominate contemporary liberal political theory) and the fact that, sociologically speaking, it is *injustice not justice* that characterises the world. One gets a very different form of theorising when one begins from where we are in terms of conditions of injustice, rather than seeking to develop compelling and intellectually coherent – but abstract – benchmarks or criteria against which we can judge present day, real world conditions of injustice. The fight against injustices is not necessarily the same as a fight for some positive conception of justice. As Simon rightly suggests, ‘injustice has a different phenomenology from justice. Understanding injustice constitutes a separate theoretical enterprise from constructing a theory of justice....injustice takes priority over justice’ (Simon, 1995: xvii; Shklar, 1990; Wolgast, 1987). Using a similar line of argument there are good reasons for recasting green political theory as a *politics of actually existing unsustainability* rather than a *politics for (future) sustainability*. This perspective implies that the analysis of actually existing unsustainability should take priority over the analysis of sustainability.

A politics of unsustainability addresses our attention to the reality of what can be called *actually existing unsustainability*, and the identification of those underlying causes for the continuation of that unsustainability or unsustainabilities. From this perspective then, the first aim of green politics ought to be to identify the drivers and causes of unsustainability and seek to reduce existing unsustainability as a precondition for the articulation and achievement of future sustainability or to map some future sustainable development path (Barry, 2012).

Indeed, we may have done better since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit - the first international articulation of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ - if we had focused attention on a politics of actually existing unsustainability rather than sustainability. The time and debate taken to develop an agreed conception of sustainability has actually ‘sustained unsustainability’ as it were. One could be forgiven for thinking that from the point of view of those profiting and benefitting from the continuation of actually existing unsustainability, that the ideal way for this system to continue relatively unchanged, while acknowledging its unsustainability, would be to focus on the pressing and urgent need to develop a workable and agreed conception of sustainability and sustainable development to guide us, complete with associated policies and strategies. This rather cynical/realistic view of the official

politics of ‘sustainable development’ is where the work of Blühdorn and others on ‘simulative green politics’ connects with the conception of green political theory outlined in this chapter (Blühdorn, 2000; Blühdorn and Welsh, 2008). It suggests that just as the rich will do everything to help the poor except get off their backs, likewise those benefitting from unsustainability (which simply put is the exploitation of people and planet), are willing to do everything to realise sustainability, except stop their unsustainable lifestyles and transform the underlying social and economic dynamics that cause unsustainability. Think of the proliferation of the growing number of academic, government, NGO and corporate documents about ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’. What would such documents contain if, instead of being framed and focused around the future achievement of some understanding of sustainability, they were framed and focused around the reduction of unsustainability here and now? What would the policy implications be of a strategy for reducing ‘unsustainable development’?

To return to this focus on actually existing unsustainability and the argument for the priority of an account of injustice over any theory of justice. According to Simon, we can identify injustice without recourse to a theory of justice (that is injustice cannot be reduced to meaning the lack or absence of justice), largely through the ideas of suffering and harm. As he puts it:

It makes a difference whether we describe our political actions as part of a *fight against injustice, against other people’s suffering*, or as a contest for justice. The two labels do not constitute different ways of talking about the same thing...Justice beckons us to create the positive in the future whereas injustice frantically yells at us to eradicate the negative in the present’ (Simon, 1995: 1; emphasis added).

An interesting and important point Simon makes concerning the separation of considerations of injustice from their attachment to justice, is that from a green perspective a critique of the current unsustainable economic system does not, and should not, depend for its validity on the specification of some positive sustainable alternative. While from a political point of view, that is, persuading people of one’s position, one might wish to develop a worked out alternative, this should not be a requirement for the critique to be politically considered and taken seriously in public policy debate. As he notes:

the negative recommendation stands on its own, without the inclusion of a positive alternative...*Requiring that negative recommendations depend upon positive alternatives has the effect of undermining the negative recommendations.* We need to listen to the negative recommendations, irrespective of whether the negative criticisms also contain positive proposals’ (Simon, 1995: 14; emphasis added).

This prescription relates to many green arguments concerning the need to challenge practices and institutions that promote unsustainability on the grounds that it is *their* responsibility to disprove the charge of unsustainability, as opposed to green objectors having to prove unsustainability (usually based on some notion of sustainability). This is a central issue of the precautionary principle (see O’Riordan and Jordan (1995), the application of which is compatible with the politics of unsustainability



outlined here: namely, in ‘turning the table’ in the debate by requiring proponents of the *status quo* to disprove unsustainability.

As Simon notes, it is the identification of harm (which does not have to have any referent to a theory of justice or what a person is due under such a theory), that enables one to develop an account of injustice conceived as independent from an account of justice. He is explicit in seeing the importance of the acceptance of a ‘health metaphor’ in defending a theory of injustice. For him, ‘Justice relates to injustice in the same way that health relates to disease. We cannot have informative definitions or analyses of each specific disease only according to what form of health the disease rules out’ (Simon, 1995: 12). It is because we can identify harm and suffering without recourse to a theory of justice, that we can say the experience of injustice cannot be reduce to the absence of being treated in accordance to some account of justice.

## **Green Politics and Human Flourishing**

If we accept this health metaphor, this represents a distinctive green view of ethics and politics (Barry, 2012). It enables us to understand the urgency of actually existing unsustainability and its associated exploitation of people, the abuse of the planet and the continuing degradation of the non-human world. One of the features of this health/suffering/flourishing perspective, and perhaps the one that results in some being critical of its use, is its potential for abuse by whoever or whatever authority determines what is and what is not ‘human flourishing’. This is a legitimate concern since anyone or any institution that determines your health can potentially do so without any reference to you – that is, such objective forms of determining what is good for people can fall foul of the ‘shoe pinching objection’. Namely that only the person wearing the shoe can know if and where it pinches: this cannot be determined by some external authority. It can have non-democratic results in that relations between people governed on the basis of ‘expert knowledge’ are usually (and often legitimately) non-democratic. The classic example here is a patient’s relationship to her doctor – we do not typically view this relationship as one that necessarily has to be structured by democratic norms. The application of democratic norms is usually viewed as inappropriate in this (and other similar cases). However, notwithstanding these important considerations, I do not think that making a health, or suffering, or harm, focus central to one’s political position necessarily leads to such undemocratic and unjust results. Another concern is ‘perfectionism’, which is the concern that such a quasi-objectively determined sense of human flourishing could result in non-democratic, individual-insensitive intrusions which would ‘force’ people to ‘flourish’ along a particular pattern over which they had not control or to which they do not lend their consent or approval.

A final concern is that this account of the human person, and the associated conception of human flourishing, is homogenous, i.e. there is one, determinate view of the ‘good life’ for humans. This would mean a politics that reduced the variety of views of the good life available to individuals and groups. One response to this (liberal) objection would be to point out the empirical experience of how contemporary liberal capitalist societies promote one dominant view of the good life, namely a consumerist one. Against the backdrop of the crushing uniformity and homogeneity often attendant upon contemporary consumerist culture, my contention

is that there would be *more, not less variety* in views of the good in a post-growth, post-capitalist social order. A shift away from the dominance of the ‘goods life’ (Doran, 2006), could open up more not less possibilities for a variety of forms of human flourishing. Another response would be, since green politics does not require that people ‘be or think green’, or ‘be sustainable’ in some determinate sense, but rather that they stop or reduce ‘being unsustainable’, which is both less contentious, and does not have the liberty or pluralism-reducing effects of ‘forcing people to be sustainable’. Relatedly, given the focus on structures and political economy dynamics that underpin green political economy, the issue in respect to unsustainability and its reduction is primarily structural and political, not necessarily to do with individual agents. Therefore, while of course having an impact on individuals green politics is less interested (though not uninterested) in the behaviour of individuals, than in ensuring that what Rawls called the ‘basic structure of society’ does not contain structures that enable, encourage or oblige/force individuals to engage in actions and practices which perpetuate actually existing unsustainability.

From the negative Aristotelian perspective outlined here, what a focus on human flourishing denotes is the determination, on a quasi-objective basis, of those features that undermine the range within which being a healthy person, viewed holistically, is possible. The aim, therefore, of a green politics of actually existing unsustainability is the speedy removal of those features, structures, cultural norms, institutional arrangements of the present social order, which prevent the realisation of this range of human flourishing for as many people as possible. Thus, the negative Aristotelianism here is not about the promotion of some narrow and determinate sense of the human good: that the good life necessarily requires active citizenship. Rather it is, on the basis of our best available knowledge that we can specify those aspects of an individual’s particular social structure (social context, milieu, environment) that are actively undermining their realisation of that range of human flourishing. Thus, this negative Aristotelianism of green politics tries to avoid or minimise the charge of ‘perfectionism’ while retaining a quasi-objective account of the conditions of human flourishing to enable the determination and, hopefully removal or reduction, of those obstacles which constrain more people from realising that range of human flourishing. That is, the aim of a green republicanism of actually existing unsustainability is primarily negative and defensive; to reduce as much as possible those external and internal features preventing people from flourishing.<sup>1</sup> Here, green political theory has affinities with both the emancipatory politics of critical theory and utopianism, though re-cast as a form of ‘concrete’ rather than ‘abstract utopianism’ (Barry, 2012).

From the account of green political theory articulated here human flourishing can be understood in a quasi-objective manner, akin to trying to specify those features that together constitute a ‘healthy human’. And a green politics of actually existing unsustainability suggests we need to begin our search by developing a view of the human person as someone who is both socially and ecologically embedded,

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting policy application of this thinking is ‘choice editing’ (Levett, 2003), that is the deliberate removal of and reduction of choice in an area motivated by a desire to both removal socially or environmentally ‘bad’ options, but which also removes the stress most people feel when faced with a bewildering range of choices in a single area or product. As he puts it, ‘*Contrary to current rhetoric, an important job of government is to restrict choice.* The state stops us assaulting, robbing or cheating each other, with the great benefit that we can live in peace and security and do deals with strangers of unknown morals’ (Levett, 2008:11; emphasis added).

biologically embodied and dependent, biographically, at different points in his or her life. In the ‘circumstances of unsustainability’ that currently prevail we need a conception of human flourishing - what it means to be a healthy human viewed holistically - that is cognisant of the finite planet and its resources. This is why one short hand summary of green political goals is the achievement of ‘low carbon, high quality of life forms of human flourishing’. In this way what is needed is to improve the ‘resource and eco-efficiency’ of human flourishing, not the eco-efficiency of conventional economic productivity and orthodox economic growth. Or, rather, we can only make decisions and judgements about productivity and economic growth in relation to how they contribute to the primary goal of human flourishing. How can we in short get maximum human flourishing while staying within the regenerative capacities and thresholds of the sustainable use of the various ecological resources of our finite planet?

Thus, a key goal of this negative Aristotelianism within green politics is the removal of those external and internal obstacles preventing human flourishing. So what are these? We can identify the following from a green political theory perspective:

- the narrowing of human identity and interests by debt-based consumerism and the deformities of human life due to poverty, insecurity, malnutrition;
- the axiomatic presentation of orthodox, undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent rather than contingent feature of an economy;
- increasing levels of socio-economy inequality;
- the sequestering of our dependence natures and needs;
- the corraling of ‘work’ into formally paid ‘employment’ and the imperatives for economic growth;
- the gender inequality of necessary reproductive work;
- the ‘crowding out’ of socially embedded forms of provisioning by the state and market.

By removing these givens the outlines of a green conception of human flourishing begins to emerge: based on ‘post-consumerist’, but not anti-materialist, forms of human identity; the centrality of public policy based on the identification of thresholds beyond which specific macro-economic policies, such as economic growth diminish rather than add to meeting human needs and flourishing; establishing ‘rough equality’ between people; fully recognising our vulnerable and dependence natures as they change over a lifetime; focusing on promoting work and not just orthodox ‘employment’; greater recognition and support for more gender equal reproductive work; and the enhancing of the social economy/convivial economy and solidarity, alongside reformed state and market forms of economic production and provisioning.

This focus on actually existing unsustainability can also be connected to viewing green politics as a form of ‘concrete utopianism’: a politics of hope for a self-transforming present, one orientated towards the here and now (hence its ‘applied theory’ character). The movement away from unsustainability is perhaps more practical as there is more chance of political agreement on what is unsustainable than what is ‘sustainable’, much in the same way that Simon notes: ‘We can find agreement more readily over what constitutes injustice than over what constitutes justice’ (Simon, 1995: xvii). Thus, there may be strategic reasons why we might want

to consider re-casting green politics as a politics of actually existing unsustainability, thereby improving its chances of making a political difference. Green politics is vulnerable, as are all oppositional and radical perspectives, of both an impatience for change and a danger of 'the perfect becoming the enemy of the good'. What this can mean is that aiming for the 'perfect' is aiming for some sense of sustainability where all the inter-related issues of the internal relations between people, and between people, place and planet have been 'solved'. The 'good' here is the 'good enough', the identification and removal or reduction of those external-structural and internal features of the human condition in the here and now, that are systematically causing harm, suffering and exploitation and thus preventing human (and non-human) flourishing.

On the one hand, there is no 'solution' that 'sustainability' represents, in that (especially from an ecological perspective) any equilibrium 'solution' will always be provisional and dynamic. On the other, a green politics focused on the achievement of sustainability, as indicated above, is liable to spend too long and expend too much energy on developing some agreed account of sustainability, to the detriment of devoting time and attention to tackling unsustainability. That is, a politics of sustainability can constrain movement on reducing currently existing unsustainability, since this way of thinking means that we cannot tackle unsustainability until we have a clear and agreed sense of sustainability. While harsh, I think this is a reasonable overview of the debate and politics around 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

A green politics orientated around analysing and reducing actually existing unsustainability also seems to have the advantage of perhaps mobilising people. What I mean by this is that often when both the realities and causal dynamics of actually existing unsustainability are revealed to people, they connect more easily to the emotional and motivational resources of injustice, than the more distant and cold dispositions of both sustainability and justice. A major issue here is that in the contemporary world the realities of unsustainability, and their causal relations, are systematically 'sequestered' and occluded under contemporary patterns of industrial globalisation (Barry, 2012). A key feature of green politics is thus 'de-sequestering' of such relations, and in that way (re)politicising them (Barry and Ellis, 2010). In 'seeing' the realities and causal relations of unsustainability - the exploitation of vulnerable people in other parts of the world, the suffering of people or animals, the sheer injustice of needless deaths - the emotional and psychological response to these need little encouragement. Sympathy and empathy are entirely ethically appropriate and much needed ways of looking at the world, especially a world so full of needless suffering as ours. In industrial societies, there are reasons other than cost, aesthetics and health and safety why abattoirs do not have glass walls. We thus may have a better chance of mobilising people around a politics of actually existing unsustainability than appealing to a sense of sustainability.

But the movement away from unsustainability is more 'practical' in another sense. It may turn out that making societies less unsustainable is a matter of *not doing something* than doing something new, such as consuming *less*, both commodities and energy. This is another central feature of green political theory, the sense that the achievement of a less unsustainable, green society, is not so much about getting from 'here' to 'there', but about 'letting go' and showing that it is the unsustainable 'here'

that is utopian and unrealistic that needs to be challenged (Mellor, 1995). This does not mean that such a transition is easy, but it does indicate that of more concern for a politics of actually existing unsustainability are that the state and public discourse should be perhaps directed more towards eliminating existing forms of consumer 'lock-in' to unsustainable and perhaps non-well-being enhancing practices, than necessarily to unleashing the power of the wind or the atom. That is, reducing actually existing unsustainability may be more about reducing and scaling back existing practices than proposing something new.

### **'People Cannot Stand Too Much Reality': The Emergence of 'Hard Green' Ecological Realism**

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins pointed out that every human culture (or indeed non-human culture for that matter) is a 'gamble played with nature' (Sahlins, 1985: ix), and like any gamble can be won or lost. One of the contemporary *Zeitgeists* we can observe is an interlocking and complex sense of anxiety about the future. This *Zeitgeist* is principally driven by fears about life in a climate changed and carbon constrained world in the aftermath of 'peak oil', dangerous climate change, and multiplied under the current global economic crisis since 2008. It is an anxiety that our current globalised carbon-fuelled capitalist system is coming to the end of the line. This chapter is written against the backdrop of a profound (and disturbing) sense of growing doom and frustration at the lack of progress on the social mobilisation, or institutional planning, for the transition to a low-carbon, or post-carbon society and economy. *And for greens this transition is inevitable.*

However, what is striking about some recent thinking on unsustainability of current dominant ways of life are those voices, discourses and works which one might categorise as 'ecological realist'. The 'hard green' analyses tend often to paint the near-future of large sections of humanity in extremely negative and stark terms. Think of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, together with the peer-reviewed science of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and mix in the complete failure of political leadership by the majority of the most powerful countries on the planet and mainstream political parties. This hard green discourse is peppered with terms such as 'peak oil', 'climate chaos', life in a 'carbon constrained world', 'climate and food (in)security', climate-imposed 'triage'. Moreover, it is gripped by a profound sense of urgency, such as the new economics foundation announcement in October 2008, that we had '100 months to save the planet' (new economics foundation, 2008). This ecological realist analysis articulates a green storyline that, on the face of it, could not be more removed from an idealist, hope-filled account of green political theory.

The sheer scale, rapidity and incontrovertible evidence of humanity becoming more 'locked-into' unsustainability, the liquidation of the planet's life support systems and the negative impact on the nonhuman community of life on the planet, is matched only by the prevarication of governments and other influential groups, especially business, and a passive consumer population. In particular, we could point to large corporations and other key sectors of the business community that have lobbied actively against policies and legislation to reduce pollution, funded climate change denial, engaged in 'greenwash' instead of cleaning up their production processes, and thereby maintained unsustainability. Or, relating it to Blühdorn's work discussed above, we could examine the 'cognitive dissonance' displayed by millions of citizens

who proclaim to know about and accept that their energy-intense, high-consumption and high-mobility lifestyles (and associated economic system and technological infrastructure) are the root causes of global and local ecological breakdown, but who either refuse or are unable to change their lifestyles to enable 'one planet living'. As Schellenberger and Nordhaus put it, 'while public support for action on global warming is wide it is also frighteningly shallow' (Schellenberger and Nordhaus, 2006: 9). George Monbiot observes:

As people in the rich countries – even the professional classes – begin to wake up to what science is saying, climate change denial will look as stupid as Holocaust denial or the insistence that AIDS can be cured by beetroot. But our response will be to demand that the government acts while hoping it doesn't. *We will wish our governments to pretend to act.* We get the moral satisfaction of saying what we know to be right, without the discomfort of doing it. My fear is that the political parties in most rich nation countries have already recognized this. They know we want tough targets, but that we also want those targets to be missed. They know that we will grumble about their failure to curb climate change, but that we will not take to the streets. *They know that nobody ever rioted for austerity* (Monbiot, 1997: 41-42; emphasis added).

So far, so good for 'simulative green politics' (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2008; Blühdorn, 2000), which constitutes an updated version of St. Augustine's request that 'God grant me chastity and temperance, but not just yet'.

In response to Monbiot's reasonable observation, green political theory does, however, suggest that people may 'riot for their own happiness'. Seen from a negative Aristotelian perspective, what they may riot for is the removal of demonstrable obstacles to human (and non-human) flourishing. As indicated earlier, green politics argues that the case for 'post-growth' rests on the argument that it is possible to simultaneously achieve a 'low carbon', low resource use but 'high well-being' society. This offers a far more positive and attractive vision of a sustainable society than those (invariably non-greens) who present a green or sustainable society in terms of a discourse of 'loss', 'sacrifice' and/or 'regress' (Meyer and Maniates, 2010). In many respects, what greens seek is to promote the serious consideration that orthodox 'economic growth' has largely 'done its job' in the developed world (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). And further, that its continuation as an uncontested cultural myth, state imperative, or as the underpinning of our modern 'social contract' in high carbon, high consumption societies, is systematically undermining human well-being, as well as liquidating the life-supporting systems of the planet. What a post-growth position needs to present is a vision of a better, improved and more advanced society. One in which social innovation is as important as technological innovation, where time begins to replace money and commodities, where sufficiency replaces maximisation and where 'economic security' for all replaces unequally distributed economic growth. It is a better world, not some impoverished, regressive or indeed abstract utopian/dystopian vision of the future. It is the outworkings of a self-transforming present, hence its 'concrete utopian' character, with most of the necessary technological, social and indeed economic practices and innovations already in existence and ready to be mobilised. That most of these are small-scale, under-recognised, or un-recognised does not detract from their importance and the powerful

fact that they *do* exist. All that is required, and of course this is a big ‘all’, is the political will, personal and collective courage, to learn about and experiment with them, and explore new ways of living more lightly on the planet. Particularly for those in the ‘overdeveloped’ world, we are asked to slim down not starve ourselves in order to address actually existing unsustainability. The issue is this: in the context of the inevitable (and hopefully ‘just’) transition to a less unsustainable society, it is not what we may lose that is moot, but what we gain.

Given the centrality of the ‘limits to growth’ to any understanding of green politics, an ecological realist discourse could be viewed as the return to, or vindication of, that earlier green analysis and discourse in a new guise (Meadows et al, 1972). While some critics at the time dismissed the limits to growth report as ‘Malthus with a computer’ (Freeman, 1973), this new and improved ecological realist perspective could be viewed as ‘limits to growth with PowerPoint’, and improved earth systems science. Contemporary examples of this updated version of limits to growth (usually we a central focus on climate change or peak oil), include Jared Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail* (Diamond, 2006), Thomas-Homer Dixon’s *The Upside of Down* (Homer-Dixon, 2006), Alister McIntosh’s *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition* (McIntosh, 2008), Derrick Jensen’s *The Culture of Make-Believe* (Jensen, 2002), the Odums’ *A Prosperous Way Down* (Odum and Odum, 2001), James Howard-Kunstler’s *The Long Emergency* (Howard-Kunstler, 2005) and Thomas Friedman’s *Hot, Flat and Crowded* (Friedman, 2008), have complemented documentaries such as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and Leonardo di-Caprio’s *Eleventh Hour*, extending to the less well known *What a Way to Go: Life at the End of Empire*, *The End of Suburbia*, *Escape from Suburbia* and *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* or documentaries such as the 2009 UK based Channel 4 production, *Life after People*.

Other indications of this ecological realism include (in the UK and Ireland) the emergence of initiatives’ such as the ‘Dark Mountain’ project founded by ‘recovering environmentalists’ (Hine and Kingsnorth, 2010), the growth and more general acceptance of the analyses of the once marginal ‘peak oil movement’, to the emergence of what may be termed ‘collapse’ authors and thinkers such as Dimity Orlov (Orlov, 2011) and David Korowicz (Korowicz, 2010). As Thomas Friedman, notes,

The world also has a problem: It is getting hot, flat, and crowded...In particular, the convergence of hot, flat, and crowded is tightening energy supplies, intensifying the extinction of plants and animals, deepening energy poverty, strengthening petro-dictatorships, and accelerating climate change. How we address these interwoven global trends will determine a lot about the quality of life on earth in the twenty-first century (Friedman, 2008: 5).

It’s not just raining reports about our rapidly deteriorating ecological life-support system, it is also raining films, documentaries, pod casts, blogs and YouTube clips.

While this corpus of books and films have popularised green thinking and certainly raised awareness of our unsustainability, they have also contributed to rendering green politics in a negative and unappealing frame (Schellenberger and Nordhaus, 2006). One of the main points they make in their ‘immanent critique’ of the US

environmental movement is how counter-productive it is to stress and amplify environmental problems (particularly within a technocratic or technological frame), without seeking to outline an attractive and compelling vision which attaches itself to peoples' values and aspirations. Simply put, the green movement has been and continues to be extremely good at highlighting the problems (and indeed finding innovative ways to do so), but less good at articulating its vision for a less unsustainable society, or how the principle of 'sustainability' can relate to a positive future. Perhaps one answer lies, as suggested above, in the green movement moving beyond a 'sustainability' frame to focusing on becoming a politics of 'actually existing unsustainability'.

James Lovelock is perhaps the most well-known environmentalist to capture this ecological realist mood. His most recent view, in his latest book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning* (Lovelock, 2009), claims that there is no point in trying renewable energy, CO2 emissions trading systems or attempts to negotiate international treaties on reducing CO2, recycling or any of the other usual components of 'sustainable development'. Lovelock foresees crop failures, drought, death on an enormous scale and massive social disruption right across the globe. The population of this hot, barren world could shrink from about seven billion to one billion by 2100 as people compete for ever-scarcer resources. As he put it in an interview, 'It will be death on a grand scale from famine and lack of water. It could be a reduction to a billion (people) or less' (Griffiths, 2009). According to Lovelock the human species should be ideally adopting a clear 'survivalist' perspective and investing in efforts to create safe havens in areas which will escape the worst effects of climate change. He puts it bluntly: "we have to stop pretending that there is any possible way of returning to that lush, comfortable and beautiful Earth we left behind some time in the 20th century" (Lovelock, 2009: 68). And in an even more chilling statement: 'The Earth, *in its but not our interests* may be forced to move to a hot epoch, one where it can survive, though in a diminished and less habitable state. If, as is likely, this happens, we will have been the cause' (ibid: 3; emphasis added).

Other, more 'post-humanist' but equally pessimistic/realistic writers such as John Gray, have rushed to celebrate and endorse Lovelock. In a review of Lovelock's book he writes:

Gaia has no particular concern for humans, and will not be propitiated by empty gestures such as carbon trading or limits on air traffic. What is needed, in fact, is virtually the opposite of the standard Green mix of wind turbines and organic farms, which could at best enable an overblown human population to eke a precarious living from an overtaxed Earth. If there is a sustainable future it is in a compact, high-tech civilisation with far fewer people (Gray, 2009: 1).

We can discern here the outlines of a new vision of a 'sustainable society', and one markedly at odds with the various accounts that pepper green political theory.

Gray's curt and cursory dismissal of green politics as wildly utopian i.e. not only unrealistic but dangerous and counterproductive – and therefore useless as a guide to our action and thinking – is matched by an equally provocative suggestion that we should concentrate on are policies for a 'sustainable retreat' in the face of inevitable



ecological degradation and resource collapse (Lovelock, 2005; Gray, 2006). This vision is a 'hard ecological' view and has clear resonances with certain Malthusian strains within green politics (Barry, 2007a; 1999b). It is a vision of a technological 'survivalist' society, one which is orientated towards saving what elements of civilisation we can. It is basically a vision of sustainable society in which we have nuclear power, energy from waste incinerators, genetically engineered crops and medicines, centralised power production, big cities and urban conurbations (though perhaps relocated inland to escape the rising seas), but at the price of social progress, justice and democracy. It is a techno-optimistic progressive sustainable society that is at one and the same time socially regressive. A low carbon China in 100 years perhaps.

Another prominent author here is Jeffrey Sachs, director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, who in his 2007 BBC Reith Lectures follows Giddens, Gray and Lovelock (and Al Gore), in promoting a techno-centric and techno-optimistic vision for approaching the challenges we face. For Sachs, the solution to our current 'triple crunch' of climate crisis, economic meltdown and energy insecurity (Green New Deal Group, 2008), is not 'a massive cutback in our consumption levels or our living standards' but 'smarter living...to find a way for the rest of the world...to raise their own material conditions as well' (Sachs, 2007). At times it is hard to know which is the more unsettling: the cosy and comforting accounts of reformist 'optimists' such as Sachs, Gore and Giddens, or the shocking and frightening views of radical 'pessimists' such as Lovelock, Demitri Orlov (Orlov, 2011), James Howard Kunstler (Kunstler, 200 ) and David Kowowicz (2010).

The solutions suggested by such 'hard ecologists' are, in a very important respect, at odds with green political theory. Not just in the obvious sense that many of the solutions proposed are antithetical to green principles, not least their authoritarian character. An equally significant way in which such solutions are inconsistent with green political theory is that they are often *non-political* techno-fixes, and in so doing present the analysis of, and transition from, unsustainability in ways that resolutely avoid the quintessentially *political* (including ethical) causes of and therefore responses to unsustainability. However, there is a very significant issue all these writers raise, and one central to green politics. *That issue in a word is vulnerability.* What all of these gloomy/realist/hard ecological analyses share is a profound sense of the vulnerability of humanity, particular human lifestyles and ways of life to natural limits and resource, energy or sink scarcities. For this reason, vulnerability is central to green politics, and here perhaps sharing much with feminist political thinking on this foundational issue.

## Conclusion

What we can say is that the analyses outlined by the new 'ecological realism' exposes the fundamental vulnerability of modern technologically-advanced industrial societies to a spectrum of problems ranging from climate change, food production, water and energy insecurity to the epidemics of obesity and declining mental health and well-being within an increasingly climate changed, crowded, profoundly unequal, unsustainable and carbon constrained world (Barry, Mol and Zito, 2013; Barry, 2012). Yet unlike hard greens, the dominant trend within green political theory begins from the position that there is little to be gained from the continuing pursuit of the

‘malestream’ technological fantasy of invulnerability, control and mastery over nature. This project and orientation to the world based on control, human invulnerability and domination of the earth, as critical theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm and Marcuse have long since pointed out, leads not to liberation and emancipation but wage and consumer enslavement (of self) and exploitation (of others, including nonhuman others). The fantasy of invulnerability, control and conquest culminates in what Marcuse brilliantly diagnosed as the ‘repressive tolerance’ and disfigured subjectivities of liberal democracy within capitalism (Marcuse, 1964).

In many respects green political theory is faced with providing analyses and responses to multiple socio-ecological dilemmas. This context for green politics has been outlined by Thomas Homer-Dixon, and his contention in a *New York Times* op-ed article in 2010, that:

*Policy makers need to accept that societies won't make drastic changes to address climate change until such a crisis hits.* But that doesn't mean there's nothing for them to do in the meantime. When a crisis does occur, the societies with response plans on the shelf will be far better off than those that are blindsided. The task for national and regional leaders, then, is to develop a set of contingency plans for possible climate shocks — what we might call, collectively, Plan Z. We need a much more deliberate Plan Z, with detailed scenarios of plausible climate shocks; close analyses of options for emergency response by governments, corporations and nongovernmental groups; and clear specifics about what resources — financial, technological and organizational — we will need to cope with different types of crises. (Homer-Dixon, 2010; emphasis added)

We are facing inevitable ecological, resource and socio-economic challenges and we are singularly unprepared for them. At the very least we should be thankful for these ‘hard greens’ for both reminding us of the fragility and contingency of our current civilisation and ways of life, and for forcing a response to the often grim and tough issues and scenarios they raise. Above all else, green political theory takes from them the importance, noted by Homer-Dixon, of the need for societies to plan for a number of future scenarios as well as actively taking steps to avoid the most negative ones.

This is the promise of recasting and understanding green political theory as a politics of actually existing unsustainability. In some ways, this take on the ‘hard greens’ is actually closer to the ‘soft green’ position outlined by E.F. Schumacher when he wrote, ‘We never know when the winds of change will blow, but when they do we must always have our sails at the ready’ (in Rosen, 2002: 181). To continue this line of thought, green politics could be said to be premised on the hope contained in the Chinese proverb, ‘When the winds of change come some people build walls, others build windmills’.

## Further reading

Short, introductory overviews of green political theory can be found in J. Barry, ‘Environmentalism’, in Axtmann, R. (ed), (2002); J. Barry, and A. Dobson, ‘Green

Political Theory: A Report', in Kukathas, C. & Gaus, G. (eds), (2003); J. Barry, 'Green Political Theory' in Barry, J. and Frankland, E.G. (eds) (2001); S. Young *The Politics of the Environment* (1992), R. Garner, *Environmental Politics* (1995); E. Cudworth's *Environment and Society* (2003) and

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The growth in green political theory's turn to critics of capitalism and orthodox economics and the development of a distinct account of green political economy can be found in the following: M. Scott-Cato, *Green Economics* (2008); M. Scott-Cato *The Bioregional Economy: Land, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2012); T.

Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* (2009); D. Boyle and A. Simms, *The New Economics* (2009); J. Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (2010); B. McKibben, *Deep Economy* (2007).

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